

Just Another Day by the_zesty_lemon

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Summary:

El Hopper, star of the Hawkins High track team is on a quest to make friends with the resident AV Club members.

Friendship and eventual romance. 80s High School / No Powers AU

1. Twist of Fate

El Hopper's perfect Sunday started with a mouthwatering stack of Eggos complete with butter and syrup, a brisk five-kilometer run in the afternoon and to finish it off: curling up on the couch to watch her beloved soap operas before retiring to bed. Her perfect Sunday ended the moment her ankle rolled out and she tumbled to the pavement, leaving behind at least the first layer of skin from her knees and chin. Blood mixed with dirt and gravel from the road, stinging painfully as she investigated what she'd rolled her ankle on.

A rock.

It was just big enough that when El had brought her foot down it had caused her to slip and her ankle to roll out. Rolling her ankle while on the brisk five-kilometer run portion of her Sunday and face planting on the pavement had not been part of the plan. Running and a darkening sky were not always the best choice when there were no street lamps, but she had not anticipated how dark it would be out on this route as the sun sank lower behind the trees. The throbbing coming from her ankle was not promising and there was at least another two kilometers before reaching the main road.

The cold September night air was sharp against her skin, her labored breaths trailed behind her like tiny white clouds. The sounds of her own breath and uneven walk were the only things she could hear as she headed in the direction of the main road. The cold had long seeped into her; damp running clothes were of no help to her to ward off the autumn air.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. El swore mentally. Her ankle was definitely sprained. It was not an injury she was unaccustomed to, but it would only get worse the more she was unable to attend to it.

Hopper was working late tonight, which meant he wouldn't be home to see she hadn't returned from her run. El's only option was to walk back to the main road and hope to flag a vehicle down that would give her a lift downtown. Her plan had seemed pretty good about half an hour ago, but as it grew darker and darker the more her heart sank with the dying sun. Sunday night traffic in Hawkins was pretty

slim and the later it got, the more her chances dwindled of flagging someone down. She could already hear Hopper's voice reminding her that she was "wasn't stupid". That's why they stuck to their rules. But El had broken one of those rules and was feeling pretty stupid right now.

"*Run close to town.*" Hopper always insisted. And what had she gone and done? Went for a five-kilometer run on a near deserted road on the outskirts of town and injured herself. El grimaced, picturing the inevitable ass-kicking lecture she'd be getting from Hopper and her best friend Max. Once Hopper realized El wasn't home, he would call Max thinking that maybe El had just gone over to her house. And once Max responded that she had no idea where El was and they both panicked—Max would definitely kick her ass after for worrying both her and Hop— if they even found her.

"Stupid." El grumbled to herself, steeling her resolve for a long and very uncomfortable walk.

...

Another half hour crawled by painfully before she heard the noise. Her heart jumped into her throat and El stopped limping, straining her ears to try and pinpoint where the noise had come from. The wall of the forest loomed on both sides of the road, bears, wolves and cougars raced through her mind like a demented circus of possibilities even though El knew such sightings were rare in Indiana.

Silence pressed against her eardrums. Whatever the noise was she didn't hear it anymore. El slowly released the breath she didn't realize she was holding, trying to calm her hammering heartbeat.

There's nothing out here. El chastised herself, *because the only one dumb enough to be out here is you.*

Just as El was about to resume walking when she heard the noise again. Her head snapped up and she scanned the darkness, the sound of her own heartbeat in her ears almost defeated the point of trying to listen. There it was again! It was a far-off kind of noise. Maybe it was a car? Heart soaring with hope, El quickened her awkward pace, focused on the direction the noise had come from. But no... she

stopped and listened again. It wasn't a car. It was voice! By the sounds of it... two voices?

The voices were suddenly much closer than El anticipated. She let out a startled noise just as bright light flooded her eyes, blinding her.

"Shit!" Someone swore loudly. The sound of squealing bike tires pierced the air as the two cyclists swerved to avoid her, one swerving right and one swerving left. Fortunately, the one who managed to swerve left came to an abrupt stop. Unfortunately, the cyclist who swerved right—swerved right into the ditch.

El blinked rapidly, trying to clear the spots from her eyes. She could barely make out the silhouette of the other cyclist as he clambered from his bike and to the side of the road.

"Dustin! Are you okay?" He called worriedly, squinting down into the ditch.

"Son of a bitch!" Dustin swore, followed by a much longer string of profanities before finally, "yeah. I'm okay." There were some rustling sounds as he climbed back up the slope of the ditch; awkwardly she stood back as the other boy held out his hand, hauling him up. Dustin looked disheveled, his jacket covered in dirt and his wildly curly hair flying away at almost every angle was adorned with twigs and grass. But he appeared otherwise unharmed.

"What the hell man?" Dustin snapped as he brushed himself off, agitatedly. Clearly, he was not happy that he'd just taken a dive into a ditch.

El bristled at Dustin's tone, but she took a deep breath. *I guess I'd be pretty mad too.*

"Sorry." El apologized uncomfortably, shuffling her aching feet.

"What happened to you? Are you okay?" The other boy asked, in the light cast by their bikes El could see his eyes widen as he took in the sad state of her bloodied chin and knees.

"I tripped during my run and sprained my ankle." El brushed her short hair from her face, looking hopefully at the bicycles lying on

the road. “Do you think you could give me a lift?”

“Well actually we are on a very tight oof—“ Dustin was quickly cut off by his friend, who elbowed him swiftly in the gut.

“Yes we can. We’re heading to our friend Will’s house. You can use the phone there.” He offered with an apologetic look. El hesitated; maybe it wasn’t a good idea to get on a bike with two boys she didn’t really know? They looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn’t place them.

“Don’t worry, the Byers are really cool. They won’t mind if we bring you.” The dark haired boy assured her, seeing her unease.

The Byers? El perked up at the name. She vaguely recalled Hopper mentioning the Byers before. So they had to be okay right? And if she were being honest, between a nice warm house or staying out here and freezing she would take the Byers’ house any day.

“I’d appreciate that...” El trailed off unsurely.

The dark-haired boy seemed to realize that this was his cue. “I’m Mike. Mike Wheeler and this is Dustin Henderson. We go to Hawkins High.” Mike introduced himself and Dustin sheepishly.

“El Hopper. I go to Hawkins High too.” Dustin made a noise of recognition. Both Mike and El glanced at him curiously.

“You’re Eleven?” Dustin’s question came out as more of a statement.

“Yeah,” El cringed, rubbing the back of her neck.

‘Eleven’ was a nickname from her freshman year that had followed her firmly into sophomore year. Some over enthusiastic track teammates gave the name to her when she won her eleventh straight race in track season last year. El had hoped that over the summer the nickname would blow over, but she’d been sorely mistaken. The rest of the school had picked up on her nickname and now she was known as Eleven by the majority of her classmates. El was certain that most of her classmates didn’t actually know her real name (or care to know) so long as she kept winning races. In sports you were either the hero or the bum depending on your performance and she

didn't want to imagine what kind of names those same classmates would call her if she lost a race.

"So just El then?" Mike quipped, breaking the strained silence.

"Yeah. Just El." El breathed with an appreciative smile, meeting Mike's eyes properly for the first time. He was so tall and gangly that she had to crane her neck a little, but even in the light cast by the bikes she was taken aback by how dark his eyes were.

"You can hop on with me El." Mike tilted his bike right side up. El was glad to see that Mike hadn't seemed to notice her strange moment. Instead, he got on his bike first and nodded at her when he was ready. She limped around to the right side of the bike, throwing her injured leg over first and settling down carefully behind him. The size of Mike's bike combined with the length of their limbs made it a little bit of a tight squeeze, her legs brushed against Mike's and she tentatively reached out to hold his waist.

"Um... is this okay?" Heat rushed to her cheeks at their proximity; her hands hovered just around his waist. There was nothing else to hold onto and El would much rather hold on to Mike than fall off the bike.

"I'm good." If Mike was uncomfortable, he didn't let it show. El's face burned brightly, glad that Mike couldn't see her face. Somehow their position on the bike felt oddly intimate.

"Ready?"

"Yes." El confirmed. She lurched a little when Mike pushed off, her arms squeezing tighter around his waist in reflex as she regained her balance. Mike and Dustin picked up speed, settling into a comfortably brisk pace.

The cold night air nipped at El's face and arms, she ducked behind Mike as much as she could to hide from it, goose bumps erupting down her shoulders and arms.

"So, as I was saying before we were interrupted," Dustin began a little haughtily as they reached a comfortable biking speed, "does

frosting turn a muffin into a cupcake? Or does it stay a muffin but with frosting on it?" Mike groaned loudly.

El turned her head and stared at Dustin in disbelief. "Or," Dustin continued as though he'd been uninterrupted, "is a cupcake not a true cupcake until you ice it?"

"Dustin oh my god, we've had this conversation way too many times!"

"Well clearly we haven't had this conversation enough because I still haven't got a straight answer!"

"A muffin is healthy. A cupcake is like a miniature cake. So it's a dessert!" Her lips twitched and El tried to fight down a laugh at the ridiculousness of their conversation. The relief of finally being off her ankle had left her feeling slightly lightheaded, and sitting on the bike pressed against Mike's warm back was making her eyelids heavy. It was only the highly entertaining bickering between the two that kept El awake.

About fifteen minutes later Mike was clearly losing patience for this topic and El was trying not to offend either of them by laughing.

"Okay so if you add too much sugar to a banana muffin recipe, it automatically becomes a cupcake?" Dustin asked dubiously. Mike let out a noise of frustration.

"Yes! I mean I don't know!"

"See! This is why we need to have this discussion again." Dustin grinned triumphantly.

"Fine," Mike relented as a house came into view. "We'll put it to a vote later. After that will you finally be happy?"

"That depends on the outcome of the vote." Dustin quipped, stopping his bike in front of the small bungalow.

Mike gently brought the bike to a stop. Sliding off clumsily, El studied the house as she waited for Mike and Dustin to park their bikes. Nerves creeped up again as El regarded the house, but the

thought of being able to get warm and use the phone outweighed her shyness.

Dustin bound up onto the porch just as the front door swung open. A fluffy white mass of excited energy came barreling out to greet him. The dog jumped and slurped at Dustin's hand with a long pink tongue before spotting El and Mike.

A cold, wet nose pressed enthusiastically against her hand and El gave the dog a timid pat after a moment of hesitation. She had never really been around dogs much before and was a little unsure. Hop never wanted pets in the cabin. He worked long hours and with El at school it just wasn't feasible. Max didn't have any dogs either, so El's experience was fairly limited.

"This is Chester. He's really friendly." Mike gave Chester a pat on the head, who leaned into him, tail wagging happily.

"Chester." El repeated, petting Chester more confidently. Chester's tail wagged even more excitedly in response to all the attention he was receiving, his long pink tongue lolling sideways from his mouth.

"Dustin, Mike! I was beginning to think you got lost." A shorter boy stood in the doorway of the house; his blond hair just brushed his shoulders. He had a kind looking face, and soft blue eyes.

"Sorry Will, we ran into a bit of a situation." Mike apologized. Will peered around Dustin and Mike, just now noticing El. Surprise flashed across his features, but before Will could say anything Dustin beat them all to it.

"Yeah she pushed me into a ditch." Dustin remarked dryly, indicating his dirty clothes and crazy hair.

"Isn't that just how you usually look?" Will asked innocently.

"Bite me." Dustin pushed by a laughing Will, disappearing into the home.

"This is El Hopper." Mike drew Will's attention back to the unexpected addition to their party. "Can she use your phone?"

"Of course," Will stepped aside quickly, catching sight of her bloodied chin and knees. "The phone is on the other side of the living room."

Making her way into the Byers' house, El made a beeline towards the pale yellow rotary phone on the far wall. She grasped the handset gingerly, trying not to get her blood or dirt on the phone and dialed the familiar number to the Hawkins Police Station. Relief flooded through her when Flo answered on the second ring.

"Hawkins Police Station." Florence greeted in her usual drawl.

"Flo, it's El." El glanced across the living room as Will and Mike both came further into the house, they were talking in low voices as to not disturb her phone call. "Is Hop around?" She asked hopefully.

"Sorry sweetie, he's out on a call. Is everything okay?" Florence questioned worriedly.

"Yeah, everything's okay. I rolled my ankle out on my run, but I'm at the Byers' house so tell him not to worry. Could you send him my way when he gets back?" El sighed into the phone.

"The Byers' house?" Florence sounded surprised. "You were a ways out." El cringed. If that's what Flo thought, Hopper was definitely not going to be pleased.

"Thanks Flo." El bid Florence goodbye before hanging up the phone. Her shoulders slumped with exhaustion as she realized that Hop could still be a long while yet.

"Any luck?" El jumped slightly as Will poked his head around the hallway corner.

She shook her head. "Hopper is out on a call. I could wait outside though until he gets here." Will waved her off with a frown.

"You'll catch a cold if you wait outside." He pointed out, "and you're more than welcome to just hang out on the couch. You're Hopper's daughter?" El nodded.

"Adopted, yes." *Why did I have to add that?* El wondered to herself.

She wasn't sure why she still had to point that out, but it didn't seem to faze Will.

"I'm Will Byers." Will held out his hand and El took it in a brief but firm shake. "My mom and Hop used to be friends in high school."

"Nice to meet you." El smiled tentatively. There was something about Will that was very soothing. Normally El was not great at the whole 'introductions' thing, but as she stood there with him the nerves in her stomach slowly abated.

"Will, are these okay?" Mike came around the corner from the hallway, a small bundle of clothes in his arms.

"Those are fine." Will nodded and Mike held the pair of sweats and a worn looking band tee to El. She reached out and confusedly accepted the bundle of clothes. El tried not to focus on the warmth that tingled from where her fingers brushed against Mike's.

"I know it's not exactly your size, but I figure you'd want a change of clothes." Will explained apologetically. "Those are my brother's clothes. He left them behind when he went to college this fall. But you're welcome to borrow them." El hugged the bundle of clean, warm clothes to her front.

"Thank you." She sighed happily.

"I'll show you where the bathroom is." Mike offered. El nodded and Mike turned around, leading her back down the hallway he had just come from. She marveled at the various photographs and children's artwork that lined the walls of the hall. Judging by the varying skill levels in the drawings, some of them must have been quite a few years ago.

Mike paused halfway down the hall, leaning into the bathroom to flick on the light for her.

"Here it is." Mike stepped aside so El could see into the bathroom. "Will grabbed his first aid kit, it's on the hamper there." Mike pointed to a bright red box on the laundry hamper. "We'll just be in the living room if you need us."

“Thanks.”

Mike excused himself before El stepped into the bathroom, closing the door gently as he retreated back towards the living room. In the quiet of the unfamiliar bathroom, El let out a breath of relief.

What a weird Sunday. Standing in the Byers’ bathroom on a Sunday evening had never even entered her mind as a possibility. And yet here she was, standing and looking... eww. El wrinkled her nose at her appearance in the mirror. Her curly mop of hair looked like a rat’s nest and the dried blood on her chin was caked with dirt. No wonder Dustin and Mike swerved off the road.

She didn’t bother trying to fix her hair and instead examined the scrapes on her hands. They didn’t look too bad, mostly painful because of the bits of gravel or dirt trapped in the now dried blood. Reaching for the taps, she gently turned the water on and waited, testing the temperature before gingerly sticking her hands under the running water.

El hissed as her scrapes stung smartly, fading to a tender throb as the cool water ran over her hands. She was relieved to see that the scrapes only looked worse than they actually were. The scrape on her chin was similar to her hands, the dried blood and dirt made it look much worse but El winced when she saw the scrapes on her knees—they were definitely deeper.

Max is still going to kick my ass. El sighed before turning her attention to the first aid kit. She dug out a couple of alcohol wipes and sizeable Band-Aids and closed the kit. The sharp coldness of the tub bit into her bare legs as she carefully lowered herself down onto the side. El was no stranger to scraped limbs and it wasn’t long before she was done patching herself up.

Once she was done with the first-aid, El pulled on the set of borrowed clothes, relishing the warmth of the fleece pants and the feel of a dry shirt against her skin. The clothes swallowed her lithe frame, but the sweat pants were warm and fleecy, and the band tee was soft and smelled like detergent. It was a wonderful feeling. She folded her dirty clothes neatly and placed them on the hamper, making a mental note to return for them once Hopper arrived.

Opening the bathroom door quietly, El followed the snippets of lively conversation drifting back into the living room. The conversation died abruptly when the boys noticed her and she hesitated, unsure where to sit.

“El! Here you can sit here.” Mike jumped nearly a foot into the air in his haste to climb out of a cushy looking chair to offer it to her once he realize she was standing there.

“Thank you for letting me use your first aid kit. And clothes.” El accepted the offered chair shyly as Mike moved past the couch and disappeared for a moment into the hall.

“You’re welcome. Are you feeling better?” Will moved over as Mike came back into the room so that he could sit down next to him.

“Definitely. And thanks to you I won’t die of infection.” El held up her palms so Will could see the Band-Aids. He smiled and opened his mouth to say something, but then looked curiously past El. She followed his curious gaze to see Mike reentering the room, awkwardly balancing a bag of frozen peas on a kitchen table chair.

“For your ankle.” Mike carefully placed the chair in front of El’s seat, handing her the frozen bag of peas with a wry twist to his pink lips. “Sorry, no ice. Just frozen peas.” El accepted the frozen peas with a small, but grateful smile.

“You’re a life saver.” El sighed contentedly as she put her foot up and placed the bag on her ankle, coolness washing over her. Mike settled back down on the couch beside Will and they fell quiet.

No one seemed to know what to say. The four of them had never really met in school, and El (much like Hopper) was no social butterfly. El was more than aware that she was horrible with small talk, her interactions often awkward and stiff. The art of making friends was just not something she was particularly gifted in – thank god she had Max otherwise she would be floundering through high school alone. And Max was the best friend she could ever ask for... even if she was a little impulsive at times. El decided she needed to try and channel a little ‘Max impulsiveness’ right now to get the conversation rolling again.

“So what do you uh... normally do Sunday nights?” *Ouch.* Okay, that sounded forced even to her.

“We normally work on our campaigns for Dungeons and Dragons.” Will threw her a bone, but upon El’s blank look he glanced to Mike and Dustin for help.

“You’ve never heard of D and D? Dungeons and Dragons?” Dustin huffed impatiently.

“It’s a role playing board game that we play, basically you have your own characters that follow a set story.” Mike explained excitedly, his dark eyes lively.

“Mike’s the Dungeon Master.” Will piped up. “I’m a wizard and Dustin is a dwarf. But there’s other classes too. And you can be different races like an elf or a Halfling.”

Should I ask for something to take notes or is that rude? El wondered, trying to absorb the new words and concepts that she didn’t understand. Elf, Halfling, dwarf, dungeon master... she might need to refer back to this later!

“Our last campaign was thirteen hours. Mike here left a bunch of plot holes though so he’s gotta up his game a little.” Dustin ignored the poisonous glare Mike shot him and drew El out of her brief musings (of which she ultimately decided against asking for note taking supplies).

“Thirteen hours?” She repeated, her mouth agape at the idea of a thirteen-hour board game.

“Well... You take a couple food breaks.” Will ignored Dustin and Mike as they began to bicker, clearly he was used to it. El’s head swiveled back and forth as though she were watching a tennis game as Mike and Dustin snarked back at each other. It became clear that Will was the peacemaker between the group.

“Is it just the three of you that play?” El forcibly interjected herself back into the conversation as Dustin was taking a breath to continue to the argument. Will shot El a grateful look.

“We have one more member of our party, but he’s grounded. Something about a thieving little sister and unjust punishment.” Dustin grudgingly admitted.

“You might have seen him around Hawkins High too. His name is Lucas Sinclair.” Will offered. *Oh.* Now that name definitely rung a bell.

El realized her face must have given away her recognition of Lucas’s name because Will asked, “you’ve met him?” in a confused tone.

“No, just um...” How did she recover? “Someone on the track team mentioned his name one time.” El finished lamely, mentally berating herself for being an open book. *Max is going to murder me. Then bring me back from the dead and murder me again.*

“Who on the track team was—“ Dustin’s question was thankfully cut off by the excited barks from Chester, a vehicle had just pulled up in the driveway.

Thank god! El sagged in relief. She would have rather taken a ten-kilometer run on her sprained ankle than answer Dustin’s question. She was a terrible liar.

“I’m home!” A woman called as she opened the front door a few moments later. She balanced several pizzas in her arms and wore a blue vest with a nametag that read ‘Joyce’. She didn’t notice El at first, a whirlwind of activity as she tossed her keys and wallet down on the sofa table and moving to head towards the kitchen.

“Come and get the pizza while it’s still hot.” Joyce finally turned to study the crowd in the living room. Mike, Will and Dustin are all in varying stages of standing up and El sat there like a deer in the headlights.

Should I even be here? Is Will going to get in trouble?

“Oh hello,” Joyce greeted warmly, looking from El to her son with a teasing glint in her eyes. “Will I didn’t know you had company over tonight! Not like those ruffians you normally hang out with.” Joyce teased.

Will jumped up to help his mom with the pizza boxes, taking them from her carefully.

“What are we, chopped liver?”

“Hey!”

“I’m Joyce Byers.” Joyce ignored the protests from Dustin and Mike, but trails off when she sees the chair, Band-Aids on El’s knees and tell tale package of frozen peas perched atop her ankle.

“El Hopper,” El blurted nervously. “Will took me in after Mike and Dustin found me out on the road. I tripped and rolled my ankle, but I’m okay. I called the station and Hop will be here to get me as soon as he can.” She rambled in one breath, hoping that Will wouldn’t get in too much trouble for having unknown company over.

Joyce gently took El’s hand, inspecting the bandages. Normally El didn’t like to be touched by strangers, but she could feel the genuine concern and warmth radiating from Joyce and she couldn’t help but let her.

“You’re Hopper’s daughter? I can’t believe that grump hasn’t brought you over to meet us sooner.” Joyce smiled, gently dropping El’s hand and standing up.

“It looks like Will’s first aid kit has taken good care of you. If there’s anything else you need you let me know. Are you hungry?” With possibly the best (or worst) timing, El’s stomach growled loudly in the quiet of the room. Her cheeks burned, mortification snaking down her spine.

“I take that as a yes. We’ll eat in the living room. Dustin, can you help me grab some plates?” Joyce stood and Dustin quickly followed her to help. Will and Mike cleared the coffee table for the pizza boxes and opened them up. The smell of hot, delicious pizza wafted over them and simultaneously El, Mike and Will sighed in anticipation. It smelled amazing! El vaguely wondered if she might be drooling, but judging by the similar looks on the two boys’ faces, no one would mind.

“Here we go.” Joyce handed El a napkin and Dustin followed up by passing her a plate.

“No Lucas tonight?” Joyce glanced around the living room, as if Lucas was just waiting to jump out from behind a piece of furniture.

“Grounded.” Will, Mike and Dustin chimed mournfully.

“Our guest gets the first slice tonight.” Joyce chastised as the boys reached for pizza. El held back a giggle as the Will, Dustin, and Mike yanked their hands back as though they’d been scalded, suitably scolded by Joyce.

“What kind would you like El? Meat Supreme, Pepperoni or Hawaiian?” Will asked courteously, disregarding Dustin’s mutter of “Hawaiian isn’t even a real pizza”.

“I have to agree with Dustin.” El’s lips twitched as Dustin’s head whipped towards her, surprise etched into his features.

“Pineapples shouldn’t be on a pizza. Pepperoni please.” Joyce took El’s plate and passed it to Will. He grabbed two big slices of pepperoni pizza and placed them onto the plate before Joyce passed it back to El. That seemed to be the cue for everyone else to help themselves to the pizza and soon the room filled with lively conversation once more.

El bit into her first slice and nearly melted in happiness. Cheesy, greasy goodness had never tasted so amazing. As El worked her way through her pizza she was only half paying attention to the conversation in the room.

Joyce caught up on her son’s day and Dustin and Mike were arguing about the best kind of pizza (Mike’s favorite was unfortunately Hawaiian). She enjoyed listening to the easy banter between the friends, it was entertaining and comforting all at once. The cozy fleece pants and the warmth of the room were lulling her into a very relaxed state. Exhaustion weighed her eyelids down now that her stomach was happy and full of pizza. They felt so heavy. Her head lolled to her shoulder and El jerked herself back into awareness. She blinked rapidly to try and clear the sleep from her eyes but it was no

use. The conversation drifted in and out as El tried to pay attention, but the chair was so comfortable and if she just moved her head just a little...

"Hey kid." El frowned.

"Too early for school." She mumbled, refusing to open her eyes.

Why was Hop waking her up so early? El jolted, realizing that she was not in fact in her nice warm bed, nor was Hopper waking her up for school. Hopper's face swam into view and El groaned, trying to force herself to wake up more. Her eyes were heavy with sleep from her nap, and much to her utter humiliation she could see Mike, Will and Dustin peering at her in concern.

"Have a good nap?" Hop asked, his knees cracking as he stood up.

"Really good." El muttered, trying to get up and get the hell out of there so she could go stick her head in the sand somewhere. Someone had been kind enough to throw a crocheted blanket over her lap; her pizza plate was also gone. Although El was touched that someone had thoughtfully gotten her a blanket, it definitely meant that everyone in the room had noticed she'd passed right out. Great.

"Did you have a good run on the outskirts of Hawkins on a deserted road in the dark?" Hopper's tone took on his 'disappointed parent voice' and El wilted. She hated disappointing Hop.

"It was good until I slipped on the rock." El mumbled, not meeting Hopper's sharp gaze. He took a deep breath as though he was about to start lecturing her but was cut off by an unexpected source.

"I slip on rocks all the time er... sir." Mike blurted from the other side of the room. To her astonishment, Dustin and Will nodded vigorously in agreement. The three boys froze as Hopper turned his stern gaze to them instead. The Hawkins Chief of Police was quite an imposing sight in his police uniform and stern face. El was impressed that they didn't back peddle and in that moment her heart stirred.

Why are they standing up for me? They barely know me. Confusion and

warmth bubbled up in her chest simultaneously. It was a strange but not unwelcome blend of emotions and El was momentarily floored. First they helped her out... and now even Dustin was trying to take some of the heat off of her?

El observed dazedly as a tense moment passed, Hopper scrutinizing Mike, Dustin and Will for any sass. Apparently, he was satisfied with what he saw on the boys' faces because Hopper sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly.

"Just be more careful kid." Hopper said finally, turning back to El, missing how Mike, Dustin and Will deflated in relief once his gaze left them.

"I will Hop." El nodded almost as vigorously as Will and Dustin had, curls bobbing as she moved her head.

"You really should have brought El along sooner Hop." Joyce's scolding voice startled the teenagers, though Hop just turned to face the petite woman with a wry twist to his lips.

"You're welcome anytime El. Though hopefully uninjured next visit." Joyce gave El a bright smile before turning to Hopper. "It's good to see you Hop." Joyce said fondly.

"You too Joyce. Thanks for taking care of El." Hopper said gruffly.

"Actually I just brought the pizza. The boys were the ones who helped El out." Joyce glanced towards her son. Hopper's gaze scanned the three boys once more as he regarded them a little more thoughtfully this time.

"Right. You, you and you. In the truck. It's a school night, I'll give you a lift home." Hopper pointed to El, Mike and Dustin, his stern face firmly back in place.

Mike and Dustin rose from the couch, bidding Will a quick goodbye before heading to the front door. They knew better than to argue with the Chief of Police after all.

"Thank you again. You really helped me out." El thanked Will once more with a soft smile. "I had fun, the parts that I wasn't bleeding or

passed out.”

“I’m glad.” Will grinned as they both moved towards the front door.

“Joyce.” Hopper nodded seriously. Joyce rolled her eyes and gave El a brief, but warm hug. She froze momentarily, unaccustomed to someone other than Hopper hugging her, but also not disliking it. Joyce was warm and smelled wonderful, her hair tickled El’s nose in their embrace but she didn’t mind.

“Come visit anytime you two.” Joyce pointedly looked at Hopper as she released El. Hopper grumbled and then turned to head outside, but El caught the smile on his features. It was a smile El had dubbed ‘Hop’s special smile’ because it only came out when he was particularly happy or proud. But even this smile she did not totally recognize. It looked nice on his normally gruff features, like he was softer somehow.

El followed after Hopper, carefully limping out of the Byers’ house to door of the truck and pulled herself into the cab. Mike and Dustin were busy grabbing their bikes and hauling them into the back of the truck. There were a couple of thunks as they climbed in and helped pull their bikes up after them. Hopper shut the door of the back cab and came around to the driver’s side.

“Cool.” Dustin said as he and Mike leaned against the divider between the front and the back cabs.

“Don’t ever do this at home.” Hopper growled warningly as he climbed into the vehicle. The old truck engine roared to life and they backed out of the driveway, waving at Joyce, Will and Chester who stood at the front step.

The ride home was quiet, aside from Hopper initially asked where both boys lived and a few whispered words between Dustin and Mike. El was glad for this as she mulled over the events of this evening, trying to sort out the jumble of emotions that was currently her thoughts. First and foremost, El wanted to apologize to Hop as soon as they dropped Dustin and Mike off for making him worry. Hop already had a lot on his plate as Chief of Police and she didn’t want to add to his worries.

Fifteen minutes later Hopper pulled up in front of a nice looking bungalow. He got out and opened up the back of the cab, pulling out Dustin's bike.

"Bye Dustin." Mike called as Dustin slid out.

El waved timidly to Dustin out the window tentatively. He returned her wave before walking his bike up the paved driveway. It seems that being on the "Hawaiian shouldn't be a real pizza team" had done the trick of getting Dustin to warm up to her.

Hopper hauled himself back into the cab of the truck, slamming the door. After a moment they were back on the road, smoothly speeding towards the suburbs.

El leaned into her seat and studied Mike out of the corner of her eye. His gangly legs were folded up awkwardly between the bike and his chest. It was surprising that the two boys actually fit back there. Dustin must have been roughly six foot and Mike was just a little taller than that. His dark, curly hair brushed the ceiling of the cab. It was fluffy and El found herself wanting to touch it, enthralled by the rich, dark coffee colour and the softness of his curls. Before she did something stupid (like actually touching his hair) El decided ask him a question.

"So is it true what you said earlier?" She whispered conspiratorially. Bewilderment flashed across his features and he unconsciously leaned closer to hear what El was saying. He was so close to her that she could easily count the spatter of freckles across his cheeks.

"What do you mean?" Mike whispered back, brow furrowing.

"That you also slip on rocks all the time." Mike let out a bark of laughter and her heart stuttered ever so slightly at the sound.

"I know. That was lame." Mike lurched and nearly bumped his head on the top of the cab as Hopper went over a pothole.

"I didn't think it was lame." The words tumbled past her lips before she registered what she was saying.

His eyes widened. "O-oh. Good." Mike fiddled with the collar of his

knit sweater, seemingly at a loss for words.

“If you're all done whispering, we're here.” El and Mike jumped. Hopper regarded both of them pointedly before kicking open the door and sliding out.

El glanced sheepishly at Mike, ignoring her warm cheeks as Hopper opened the back hatch.

“Bye Mike.”

“Bye El.” Mike said shyly before he climbed out of the cab and took his bike from Hopper. Muffled words were exchanged before Mike walked his bike towards his house and Hopper climbed back into the truck with a grunt.

A few minutes later they were turning onto the highway that led towards the cabin. El was loath to break the silence of the truck, but she did want Hop to know how sorry she was now that they didn't have an audience.

“Sorry Hop. I'll make sure I stick closer to town for my runs from now on.” El promised, eyes downcast.

Hopper reached over with one hand and tousled El's already messy hair fondly.

“I know kid. Just be careful next time.” And that was it. She knew she was forgiven. They shared a brief smile, both relieved that everything was good between them.

The dark winding road sped by and El sank down into her seat, getting comfortable. It had been a very strange Sunday. As the day's events replayed in her mind, El couldn't help but smile. Despite the sprained ankle, scraped body parts and general discomfort, El was pretty sure she might have made some new friends and that was almost as perfect as a Sunday could get.

2. Chapter Two: Whip It!

The shriek of the alarm clock ripped El out of dreamland and firmly punted her into morning. Reaching out blindly, she groped around her nightstand to stop the horrible sound. She hammered the alarm clock and released a deep sigh, happy to when the blissful silence returned.

Knock, knock, knock! Hopper rapped his knuckles sharply against the door and El groaned loudly.

"Time to get up kid." His voice was muffled through the door.

"Okay, okay. I'm up." She grumbled, sliding out of bed in a daze of sleepiness. El stood up, putting her full weight on her ankle thoughtlessly.

"Ouch!" Pain bit at her ankle, banishing the last traces of sleepiness.

El flopped back down onto the bed. She lifted her ankle onto her knee in order to inspect the damage, running her fingers gently over her ankle as she searched for any visible signs of bruising. It was a little swollen, but there wasn't any discoloration that she could see. Satisfied, El reached for the familiar drawer in her bedside table. She rummaged around for a moment before pulling out a spool of elastic bandage. This was not the first time she'd had to wrap her ankle and it probably would not be the last. After wrapping, El held on to the end of the bandage, carefully standing up to test the waters.

Discomfort, but not pain. *Perfect.*

Hopper was already sitting at their modest sized kitchen table when El emerged from her bedroom, dressed and ready to go.

"How's the ankle?" Hop asked, glancing at her from over the top of his newspaper.

"Good. It's just a mild sprain. I'll be running again soon." El helped herself to some toast and a banana before sitting down at the table. She began to eat her breakfast happily, content with their quiet but

companionable routine.

The shrill ring of the phone broke the quiet morning spell. El knew this could mean only one thing.

Grumbling, Hopper dropped his newspaper onto the table and got up to answer the phone. El began shovelling her toast into her mouth, half listening to Hopper at the same time.

"Hopper here." There was a moment of silence as he listened to whoever was on the other end of the line.

"Uh huh. And why did he do that?" Hopper asked exasperatedly. He muttered under his breath as (presumably) Flo filled him in on a situation at the station.

"Okay. Okay. I'll be right there." He sighed tiredly before hanging up the phone. The job of a police chief was an unending one.

"Let's go kid, I need to go in early today."

El nodded, her mouth full of toast. She stood, dropping her plate in the sink and grabbed the banana to go.

In less than a minute she was ready and standing by the door of Hopper Cabin, backpack slung over her shoulder. This was not as uncommon of an occurrence that they would have liked. Often Hopper was called in early, or worked late at the station because of some kind of situation popping up that only the Chief of Police could handle.

...

The September morning was crisp and clear as Hopper and El exited the cabin and began their walk towards the highway. Hopper Cabin was older, yes, but El loved it. She'd only ever lived in the city before Hopper, and the cabin was quiet and peaceful.

This was one of her favourite times of the day. She loved the cool morning air against her cheeks, the bright autumn leaves and the sunlight streaming through the trees warming the frostbitten ground. They stepped over the tripwire in perfect synchronization, an

installation of Hopper's in order to alert them to any trespassers. She loved the sound of Hopper walking beside her, his heavy steps crunching against the forest floor. It was a moment they could keep to themselves and a moment that El cherished.

The truck was waiting by the side of the highway for them, the windows frosted over. The door squeaked loudly as she pulled herself in, sliding onto the worn leather seats. El arched against the cold leather, a shiver running down her spine. Her breath lingered in the air as she adjusted her backpack and reached for the old brush Hopper kept in here. He started the old truck and accepted the brush with a grumble, getting out to quickly scrape off the windows. Once the windows were clear enough to see where he was driving, Hopper hopped back in and they were off.

Hopper pulled smoothly into the Hawkins High School parking lot about ten minutes later. It may have well have been a ghost town for how many cars were currently there, but she didn't mind. El nudged the door open with her foot and slid out.

"Have a good day kid." Hopper said with a nod.

"You too Chief." El swung her backpack over her shoulder and saluted teasingly. Hopper snorted at her antics before she shut the door and he sped off.

El watched him go before turning around sharply and walking towards school. Normally she headed straight to her locker to wait for Max. But today there was still about a half hour to kill before her best friend got to school.

Shoving one of the front doors open, she paused as the subsequent slam rang through the hall. There was not another teenager to be seen. The halls were normally bustling and rowdy. It was strange to see it so empty.

Knowing that she shouldn't spend too much time on her feet with her ankle still injured, El moved to find a place to sit. There was a bench around the corner from Max and El's lockers that they had officially dubbed as their 'secondary meeting place'. There she could also comfortably catch up Max about her strange Sunday adventures.

El dropped her backpack down onto the bench sat next to it. Digging out her trusty Walkman and headphones, she settled in and pressed play. She fished her notebook out from her backpack, it was going to be a while before Max got here and she might as well get some of the homework done that had been unintentionally neglected on Sunday.

Some time later there was an abrupt knock against her foot that made her legs lurch. El laughed, thinking it was Max who had snuck up on her. She looked up, fully expecting to see her best friend but was instead met with the smirking face of Troy Wilkins. The smile slipped so fast from her face El was certain she could hear it shatter on the floor below her.

"Happy to see me Eleven?" Troy pushed a hand through his hair with an arrogant twist to his lips. Her good morning mood curdled like milk left in the sun.

"What do you want?" El scowled, very conscious that the two of them were almost entirely alone.

"What do you want?" Troy mimicked in a poor imitation of El. She bristled but tried not to let it show, choosing to try and burn a hole through his fat head with her eyes.

"If you're here Red must be around. Where is she?" Troy glanced around as though Max would appear for him.

Troy had been relentlessly harassing Max for months now. From asking her out again and again to crudely describing what they would do on their supposed date, Max had nearly put a foot through Troy's chest several times already. He was not the type who liked to be told no and the only reason why Max didn't beat Troy to a pulp was because of the track team. Max both loved and needed the opportunities the track team would bring her. She had already been in trouble with the school several times in her short stint in Hawkins. Max knew if she did beat the crap out of Troy, who also happened to be a star football player, she'd be booted from the team. It was an incredibly frustrating situation.

"Go away." El rolled her eyes, moving to put her headphones back on. Troy snatched the headphones from El's hands and tossed them to the

floor. Her Walkman landed on between them with a loud clatter.

"What? Jealous? You want me in your pants instead?" Troy sneered unkindly. Bile rose in her throat as he stepped closer, towering over El and clearly enjoying how she unconsciously leaned away to put more space between them. After a tense moment, Troy relented and stepped back with a pleasantly cruel smile.

"But I guess I wouldn't turn down practice. Even ugly bitches have their use." El's face burned, his words lashing across her cheeks like an ugly brand.

Troy turned and headed back down the hall, dismissing her as though she were nothing.

El to her shame, didn't say a word as Troy left. Anger simmered under her skin as though it would burst forth and devour her whole. She took a few deep breaths and tried to tell herself that the words a mouth breather like Troy meant nothing. But the words both stung and disgusted her.

Even ugly bitches have their use.

She felt dirty, as any interaction with Troy often left her. But now he was gone. So the terrible things she wanted to say, wanted to *scream* at him evaporated and was replaced with a bitter taste on her tongue.

She retrieved her Walkman and headphones from the ground. Luckily they appeared undamaged but El could not stop the way her fingers curled around them as her anger still had yet to abate.

Privately (because she knew Max wouldn't like it), El told Hop about the situation with Troy. As much as El knew it pained Hopper, Troy was doing nothing but making verbal comments so there was not much he could do. He wasn't following Max home or physically trying to grab her. Never had El seen Hop look so angry and yet so disappointed. She knew that Hopper also had a soft spot for Max, despite acting like he was a grump. And to hear some "horny punk" was harassing Max had not gone over well. He'd growled about how he'd "keep on eye on the bastard" and that if "Troy so much as touches either of you I'll lock him away myself and throw away the

key". Hopper's words both assured and worried her. She didn't want Max to have to put up with any kind of harassment. And basically until something actually happened—physically— Max was powerless to stop it.

Stewing resentfully on these thoughts, El almost didn't catch a glimpse of the familiar vibrant hair of her friend out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head and raised an eyebrow, catching Max in what looked like some kind of 'sneaking' pose mid-step. Once she realized the jig was up, Max laughed and dropped her sneaking stance.

"Damn it. I was trying to scare you." Max huffed, dropping her backpack on the floor beside the bench and leaning her skateboard next to it. She grinned happily before noticing the scrape on El's chin.

"What's that?" Max asked sharply, her blue eyes trained on the scrape that decorated El's chin. That's when Max caught sight of the look on El's face.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" El shied away from Max's scrutinizing gaze and the words tumbled out far too quickly to be convincing.

"El." Max narrowed her eyes warningly. "Friend's don't lie."

It was a saying that El was certain Max had read off a bumper sticker early in their friendship. When El asked Max about the origins of the phrase, Max shrugged bashfully and said she must have heard it somewhere but couldn't remember. It sounded like something that was sewn onto an Eagle Scout badge that you got for being a good friend. But the simple, endearing phrase had helped keep them both accountable to each other despite how they also poked fun at it. Bottling your feelings or lying to your friend was never good and this phrase was a reminder of that for both of them. For two people who really sucked at making friends, it was important.

"Sorry," El sighed. She could never hold out long from Max. "Troy visited me before you got here." The effect of her words was immediate.

"Did he do that to you?" Max's snarled, face stormy. El feared Max would lunge off the bench to go hunt Troy down.

"No! No." El assured Max seriously, making sure her friend understood that the scrape hadn't come from their hated classmate. "This was from yesterday, I fell on the pavement. I promise." Some of the tension left Max's shoulders and she let out a relieved breath.

"Okay. So what happened?" Max believed her.

"He didn't say much. Just asked where you were and said some uh... gross things when I told him to go away." El explained. Already she was feeling better talking to Max about it. Perhaps they could daydream about all the ways they would hypothetically dispose of Troy. That always cheered them up.

Max made a noise of disgust and then looked apologetically at El.

"I'm sorry you had to see his ugly mug so early in the morning. Whatever he said to you is not true, you know that, right?" Max asked, her eyes searching El's.

"Yeah. I know." El offered Max a weak smile, before noticing that the halls were becoming increasingly full of teenagers. It must have been getting close to class time.

"We should get going." Max grabbed her bag and skateboard, waiting for El to gather her things. "Whoever comes up with the best way to get rid of Troy wins. We'll compare notes at lunch." El grinned in response, her spirits lifting as they headed towards their lockers.

...

Morning passed by in a blurry haze of boredom. Normally El enjoyed English Literature; but she just couldn't seem to get into it today. From the back of the classroom she could see Max scribbling furiously on her notepad and though it appeared she was a diligent student, El knew that she was likely working on their contest. She tried to pay attention, or even work on their contest, but El found her mind wandering to the events of Sunday.

Will, Mike and Dustin saved her skin. Dustin had been

understandably prickly to her at first, but he'd seemingly warmed to her by the end of the night.

Max and El were the 'new kids' in Hawkins. Even several years after Max moved here she was still considered the new kid. El had only been in Hawkins for almost a year and a half, but moving to such a small town (especially in high school), the odds were pretty stacked against you in the friend department. Everyone already had their friends and it seemed they were quite content not to bother making new ones.

When El first moved here with Hopper she was completely alone and dreading high school. She knew no one in Hawkins except her adoptive father. Alone and anxious, El's first day of school had been miserable. The words she had practiced in her head never came out right and when El tried to start a conversation she mostly got exaggerated eye rolls or sneers. Her hand-me-down sweater and overalls were an easy target for her peers. By the end of the day El knew she'd be spending the next four years of her life alone.

After the final bell rang she'd sat down on a bench outside of the Hawkins High track, seeking solace from the stares of her classmates while she waited for Hopper. At one point El heard someone approaching, and she didn't even bother looking up, thinking it wasn't her they were coming to.

"Hey new kid," A voice had greeted casually. El looked up, surprised that anyone was talking to her. Most of the day she'd heard whispers and couldn't help but feel that she was an animal on display at a zoo. A lithe, red headed girl stood before her. She wore a sporty red jacket and a simple pair of jeans and had a skateboard tucked under her arm. Her blue eyes were intense—it was a little unnerving to be on the receiving end of such a gaze.

"Yes?" El asked, eyeing the girl warily. If she was here to pick a fight or do something unkind, El would rather get this over with quickly.

"I'm the new kid too. Max Mayfield. What are you listening to?" Max pointed at El's headphones.

El, though confused and a still cautious, held them out to her automatically. Max gently took the headphones and lowered them over

her own ears, brushing her long red hair out of the way as she did so. El watched as Max's head bobbed to the music for a moment.

"Nice. Can I sit with you?" Max asked hopefully. Suddenly her gaze didn't seem quite so piercing.

"Y-yeah!" Startled, El scooted over while nodding exuberantly. Max smiled and settled down beside El.

"Do you have a name, new kid?" Max handed the headphones back to El.

"El. El Hopper."

And just like that El acquired a best friend. As it turns out Max was relatively new to Hawkins too, having just moved here after her mother remarried. Initially they bonded over being the outcasts in such a small town, but after that their friendship had really taken off.

El would be forever grateful that Max had the guts to approach her first. If Max hadn't, they may never have become such good friends! The thought was something she did not like to linger on, but it really made El think about what happened on Sunday.

Was yesterday an opportunity that she should not let slip by? Was this the flag of friendship being waved and she missed it?

Determination flared in her chest. She could not let this opportunity pass! Will had mentioned that their final party member was Lucas Sinclair. The very same Lucas Sinclair that Max had a crush on for the past six months. This was both an opportunity for friendship and for Max to finally get to know Lucas.

El's gaze slid to the back of Max's head, nearly burning a hole through her friend's skull. As if Max sensed someone's eyes on her, she turned around and looked to El first. El smiled innocently and waved at Max, realizing that if she was going to try and make the plan that was slowly forming in her head happen, she really needed to work on her poker face. Max narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but turned around again before the teacher could scold her.

Reaching for her pencil, El quickly turned to a random page near the back of her notebook and jotted down a numbered list:

(1) Befriend Party.

(2) Introduce Max to Lucas. Maybe they'll get to know each other!

El furrowed her brow. She would have to think that point through a little more. She couldn't introduce Max to Lucas when El hadn't even been introduced to him yet either. She moved on.

(3) All of us become friends.

El smiled at the last point. It felt a little silly to write such a thing down, and yet it was oddly comforting to have a plan.

She definitely would not forget how kind and considerate Will had been last night, lending her first aid supplies and some fresh clothes. Or even Dustin after he'd warmed to her (she did, after all cause him to swerve into a ditch). And El wouldn't forget that it was Mike who offered her to ride with him and how he had thoughtfully fetched a chair and some frozen peas in order to elevate her ankle. Or how she had made him laugh in the back of the truck, an unexpected but light sound that made El feel as though she were glowing because she was the cause of it.

If they were all so kind, El couldn't help but wish for her and Max to be apart of that kind of friendship group. Though she hadn't met Lucas yet, El imagined that he must be similarly friendly.

Satisfied with her plan so far, El practically floated into her next class. Max had math class and El was in American History for the period before lunch so they always parted ways at the door of English Literature.

It was while she was floating into the classroom that El came face to face with one of the subjects of her thoughts.

"Mike." El blurted out, startling Mike—who was sitting *right there!* Right in her history class in the row closest to the door! How on earth had she never noticed him before? He was so tall and gangly he was a little hard to miss. Not to mention the knitted sweaters, which were rather unique.

Mike, who looked suitably surprised by her sudden outburst, turned

to her, his dark eyes wide. "El?"

"I mean uh... Hi! Mike." El recovered lamely, wondering if she should dig her own hole in the ground and hop right in. Luckily no one but Mike seemed to have noticed her weird outburst and to her immense relief, he smiled.

"Hi El." He greeted, sounding a little shy. They stood there for a moment, unsure of what to say to one another, but neither wanting to move.

"How is your ankle today?" Mike asked casually.

"Better. Thanks to you guys." El said sincerely. "You probably saved it from getting worse with the frozen peas and the chair you brought me."

"It was no problem." Mike assured her bashfully, turning slightly pink from her praise. "It was the least I could do after almost running you over."

"Okay everyone let's begin. Get to your seats." Ms. Hotchkiss called over the chatter of the students. El tried not to be too disappointed that their conversation had been cut short.

"Well, I guess I'll just be over there." *Smooth*. El cringed inwardly when she awkwardly pointed across the classroom to her seat, near diagonal to Mike's and far behind him.

"And I guess I'll just be right here." Mike smiled wryly, pointing downwards.

El fled to her desk before she could put her foot in her mouth any more. She quickly brought out her notebook and pencil as Ms. Hotchkiss began the lecture, trying to calm the nerves in her stomach.

Focusing on class today was a losing battle. El found her mind firmly fixed on the boy who sat across the class from her. She was happy they'd gotten to talk, even if it had only been for a few moments. A different thought suddenly dawned on El.

What if he doesn't want to be friends? The thought left an unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach. It was something that El hadn't even considered. Yes. She wanted to be friends, but would Mike want to? Would Dustin or Will or even Lucas welcome new friends? Or was there some kind of secret quota that was enough friends for one person? She frowned.

Would Max even want to be friends with the boys? What did they really even have in common? Max and El were both on the track team while all she knew was that the boys liked to play Dungeons and Dragons and rode bikes. That wasn't a whole lot to go on...

But at least she could try.

Once more optimistic, El refocused on the important homework assignment... If she didn't get her plan for Troy disposal done by lunch, Max would win by default and she couldn't have that.

...

The halls were bustling and bright with the hum of students as El filed out from history class. Her good mood made it nearly impossible not to walk without a spring in her step. Reaching her locker, she cheerfully loaded this morning's books into her locker and grabbed her lunch.

"Hey El." Max appeared at her elbow, quickly opening her locker and doing the same.

"Hi Max." El greeted happily, closing her locker. Max rummaged around for a few moments; dumping the books she needed for this afternoon into her backpack and grabbing her lunch.

"Ready to go? I've got a whole list of suggestions on how to dispose of..." Max trailed off. El frowned when she noticed the peculiar look on Max's face.

"Hey El." A new voice greeted timidly. El spun around, surprised to see Will standing there. His features were hesitant, as though unsure he should be approaching her in school or not.

"Hi Will," El smiled warmly. She could practically see the tension

melt from his shoulders.

"I wanted to give you these before I forgot." Will held a small bag up. Curious, El accepted the bag and peered inside. It was her track clothes from the previous night! Though from the smell of fresh laundry detergent, they had clearly been washed.

"Oh! Thank you! And thanks washing them for me." El said happily. She could practically hear Max's jaw hit the ground behind her.

"My mom put them on for you. She thought you might need them sooner than later." Will explained, a little alarmed by the growing look of disbelief on Max's face, who was standing directly behind El.

"I haven't washed your clothes yet." El admitted, feeling as though now she really should have. Not that her and Hop had a dryer or anything so she would have had to give them back to Will wet.

"Don't worry about it." Will shook his head. "Just get them back to me before Christmas time when my brother comes home."

Will bid them a quick goodbye, leaving the two girls alone once more.

"What the hell was that?" Max whirled on El as soon as Will was out of ear shot.

"What?" El asked innocently, pretending as though she really had no idea what Max was talking about.

"What do you mean what? Since when are you best friends with Will Byers?" Max exclaimed, disbelief dripping from her words. Clearly, their schemes of how to get rid of Troy were forgotten for now.

"Well that's not true," El said thoughtfully. "Because you're my best friend." Max looked ready to explode, but then finally caught sight of the coy smile on El's lips.

"Mouth breather." Max rolled her eyes, giving El a firm punch in the shoulder. El couldn't help but laugh.

She rubbed absently at her smarting shoulder as they walked through

the front doors of Hawkins High and headed toward their usual spot near the track. The bench that Max had first approached El on had become their go-to lunch spot when the weather permitted.

It was wonderfully sunny outside. The trees that bordered the school fence were full of warm autumn coloured leaves and against the blue sky they looked so vivid it was stunning.

"Spill it, El." Max huffed when they were safely out of earshot of any classmates.

"I rolled my ankle and wiped out off of Cornwallis somewhere. It was dark when Mike and Dustin nearly ran me over with their bikes." El hopped onto their bench.

"So that's where this came from?" Max pointed to her chin.

"And these." El rolled up the leg of her pants to show Max the scrape on her knee.

"What happened next?" Max eyed El's scrape sympathetically.

"They gave me a ride to Will's house and let me use the phone."

"How'd Hop take it?" Max cringed, knowing that El was supposed to run closer to downtown.

"Flo had to pass on the message for me because Hop was out on a call," El shrugged, "he wasn't happy with me, but we're good now."

"What happened while you were at the house? Was it weird?" Max dug out her lunch, unwrapping her sandwich absentmindedly.

"It was a little weird at first. Only because I don't really know them." El scrunched her nose in thought. "But Will let me use the phone and his first aid kit. Mike grabbed some of Will's brother's clothes because mine were gross. I forgot them on the hamper so that's what Will was talking about." Max nodded.

"Oh good. I thought you'd gone and got naked at the Byers' house or something crazy." El nearly choked on the water she had just taken a deep drink of.

"Max!" She exclaimed, red faced as the water dribbled down her chin.

"That was payback for earlier." Max laughed. "So when did Hopper come and get you?"

"Sometime around 10:30 I think?" El mused, "but he gave Dustin and Mike a ride home too." El realized this was about a good of a time as any to broach the subject with Max about becoming friends.

"I think you'd like them." El leaned back casually, carefully not making eye contact with Max. She could see Max's incredulous look from the corner of her eye.

Don't look at her. You'll blow it if you make eye contact.

"Aren't they nerds?" Max asked bluntly. El turned to Max with a frown.

"No. I mean, I guess they are? But so what? They like a board game called Dungeons and Dragons... which was confusing but sounded like it could be fun." El defended, annoyance creeping into her voice. The red head simply raised an eyebrow at her friend.

"Wow. One night at Byers' and suddenly you're hooked? What did they do? Feed you Eggos?" Max grinned as El turned bright pink.

"Shit, they did feed you didn't they. No wonder." Max snickered at El's increasingly pink face.

"It was pizza!" El whined. "Not Eggos." Max snorted, but then seemed to appear as though she was mulling over what they were talking about. El waited with bated breath. Max could be so stubborn; once she made her mind up about something it was hard to change it.

"Fine. I'll meet the nerds." Max sighed finally. El perked up, a happy smile pulling at her lips until Max turned to look at her with what could only be described as an evil smirk.

"But on one condition."

El eyed her best friend suspiciously.

"What is it?" She asked nervously, though in her sinking heart she knew the answer.

"You have to let me teach you how to skateboard finally!" Max grinned.

El blanched. Ever since they first met, Max had been trying to convince her to try it. She had managed to evade her skateboard lessons thus far, but it seems Max was a cruel negotiator, who knew when she had El over a barrel. There was already a victorious smirk stretching lazily across Max's lips.

"Deal." El mumbled. Her face looked as though Max had kicked a puppy right in front of her.

"Deal." Max agreed, shaking El's hand firmly and that was that.

They moved on to more important things, like who had won the 'dispose of Troy ideas' contest.

3. Waiting for a Girl Like You

“What the hell is up with you today?” Lucas snapped exasperatedly as Mike nearly knocked over his carton of milk for the third time that lunch hour. It wouldn’t have been so bad if they weren’t eating around expensive AV Club equipment that most definitely could not be introduced to water.

“Nothing!” Mike said defensively, shooting Lucas an annoyed look as he steadied the carton. Lucas rolled his eyes and turned back to Dustin, who also eyed Mike strangely.

Okay, so maybe Mike was lying when he said “nothing” was up with him.

His head had been firmly stuck in the clouds since Sunday night, when they’d nearly run down their fellow classmate and star track athlete: El Hopper.

She was the mysterious adopted daughter of Chief Jim Hopper and had only appeared at Hawkins High at the start of freshman year. She always seemed to be hanging around with Max Mayfield, fellow track athlete (a sprinter). He’d always assumed that El was another jock, hanging out with other jocks like Max.

But...

She wasn’t a typical jock at all. She was kind and a little shy, but El had even listened to them ramble about Dungeons and Dragons! Often when Mike started on any of his hobbies, a glazed look began to form. It was a look he most often saw on his father’s face. She was much less scary in person, he’d always seen her with a very stoic or stern look while at school, but she’d been a lot *softer* somehow on Sunday evening.

The daze had only worsened Monday morning. Mike fully expected El to ignore him in class (now knowing how big of a nerd he was), but El had surprised him again by talking to him.

Mike was beginning to feel as though he judged a book by its cover

and it *really* bothered him. Maybe the reason why he only ever saw her talking to Max was because that was all she had for a friend?

It left a strange feeling sitting in the pit of his stomach.

“Hand me the Philips head.” Dustin instructed, drawing Mike out of his thoughts. Lucas rummaged around in their modest toolbox before slapping the screwdriver into Dustin’s outstretched hand.

The boys figured out quickly when they’d entered Hawkins High that without a dedicated staff sponsor such as their beloved middle school science teacher, Mr. Clarke, the AV Club was constantly considered for budget cuts. Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas were the only four members and despite some attempts by them to get others interested, no one seemed to appreciate such a nerdy hobby. Determined not to let the club get cut, they had carved out a nice niche for themselves. In exchange for helping maintain the audio and visual equipment at Hawkins High, they could keep their club. It was a relationship that was mostly win-win for both sides.

“Where’s Will anyways?” Lucas asked as Dustin demanded yet another screwdriver. This time Lucas gave Dustin’s outstretched palm a little stab, prompting Dustin to flip him off and snatch the screwdriver.

“He went to return El’s clothes.” Mike remarked casually.

They’d made sure to bring Lucas up to date on Sunday’s events before classes this morning, so Lucas was not entirely unprepared, but his eyes still widened comically.

“She got naked at Will’s house?” Lucas nearly choked on the bite of his sandwich he’d just taken.

“What? No! Her clothes were dirty and Will lent her some of Jonathan’s.” Mike spluttered.

“So...she kind of got naked.” Dustin mumbled under his breath. Lucas and Mike’s heads swivelled as one to face him.

“What?” Dustin shrugged. “She kind of had to get naked because she changed clothes, didn’t she? So all I’m saying is technically she got

naked at Will's house."

Mike groaned. He really didn't want to think about the word "naked" and El in the same sentence right now.

"Who got naked at my house?" Of course Will would walk in at that exact moment.

"El Hopper did, technically." Lucas chimed in helpfully.

"Well," Will looked thoughtful, "I guess she did change clothes at my place."

"Okay, okay!" Mike snapped, "we all get it. El was technically naked at Will's house. Can we please stop talking about this now?"

The joking atmosphere died abruptly. Will, Dustin and Lucas all turned to stare at him.

Mike knew they wouldn't ever actually repeat the words "El Hopper was naked at Will's house" outside of the room. Something like that would start a vicious rumour and they had no intention in being mouth breathers who would do that. But El Hopper was a topic that he couldn't get out of his head since Sunday evening. He was pretty sure he'd replayed and analyzed the truck ride home over a hundred times in his head by now.

He didn't want to overthink a chance meeting that would probably be forgotten by El and they'd go back to being strangers... but of course, she surprised him this morning by greeting him and making conversation! Mike was stuck on the topic of El Hopper, and talking about her being naked was not helping.

"Uh oh Mike, watch out!" Dustin's mouth curled into a smirk.

"What?" Mike frowned.

"You've got a crush!" Dustin teased.

Wait, what? I don't have a crush on El? Mike's brain stumbled over itself as his face cycled through several impressive shades of pink. He was oblivious to how Dustin's eyes widened when he failed to

respond in a normal timely manner.

Dustin's smirk slid right off of his face as he realized that maybe he hit the head of the nail a little too perfectly.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Mike finally managed to stammer. Dustin, Will and Lucas looked at him in disbelief.

"Okay Mike," Will assured him, "whatever you say." Mike scowled, prickling at Will's blatantly disbelieving tone.

"You've got to be kidding me. Suddenly you have a crush on El Hopper? Didn't you just meet her yesterday?" Lucas asked incredulously.

"Yeah! She nearly killed me!" Dustin complained.

"Well you guys almost did run her over." Will amended.

"I don't have a crush on El." Mike insisted, ignoring Dustin's outburst. His mind reeled, trying to stop the panicked beating of his heart. It felt like his friends were ganging up on him to throw him over a cliff!

"So that's why you definitely haven't been a space case all day?" Lucas deadpanned.

Shit. Mike cursed inwardly.

"I haven't been a space case all day! I've just been... distracted."

The answer was so lame that his friends simultaneously rolled their eyes.

Mike pulled at his collar uncomfortably, his cheeks hot as he squirmed under their disbelieving gazes. Seeing how flustered Mike was, Will (ever the peacemaker) decided to take it easy on him.

"Mike's crush on El aside, how's the video recorder coming?" With that, the interrogation was over for now and he slumped in relief even as Will delivered one final jab.

I don't have a crush on El, Mike thought to himself sternly. Like Lucas said, he'd only just met her yesterday. And besides that, he didn't really know her. So there. He couldn't have a crush on El Hopper. And he definitely didn't think she was cute.

Satisfied for now, Mike forced himself to refocus on the task at hand. They had to finish this project before lunch ended after all.

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On Wednesday morning Mike knew something was off before he opened his eyes. It was as though someone poured a bucket of sand down his throat while jacking up the thermostat to a stifling temperature. Was he at the beach?

Cracking one eye open, his room swam into view and confirmed that he was at home and not on a hot beach somewhere. A sharp rap at the door surprised him; normally his mom left him to his own devices until he was at breakfast with the rest of the family. Mike sat up sluggishly.

"Come in." He called. But it didn't sound like him. It sounded like someone who'd swallowed a bullfrog; his voice came out as a strangled croak.

"It's seven-thirty Michael. You slept in." Karen Wheeler opened the door, her brow furrowed in concern. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine." Mike cringed at the sound of his own voice betraying him.

Karen raised an unimpressed eyebrow, before coming to sit down beside him on the bed. She leaned over and pressed her cool hand against his forehead.

"Hmm." She hummed and Mike watched his mother's brow crease further. "Just as I suspected. You could fry an egg on that forehead." He snorted weakly at the joke. She stood and made her way back towards the door.

"You're staying home today. I'll call the school." Her tone left no room for argument.

“Okay.” Mike agreed, too exhausted to argue with her. He slipped back under the covers.

“I have to drop Holly off, but then I’ll make you some porridge for breakfast when I get back. Stay in bed.” Karen instructed sternly, waiting until Mike nodded in confirmation before she left the bedroom.

The familiar noises of the Wheeler household in the morning wafted up the stairs as his family ate breakfast and got ready for the day.

At some point Mike must have closed his eyes, because next thing he knew his mother was waking him up.

“Michael, you need to eat something sweetie. It’s almost lunch time.”

He blinked a few times to try and clear the fog that permeated his head but to no avail. The rich scent of homemade chicken soup drifted from the nightstand, where she had placed a tray with soup and some plain crackers.

“Try to eat something and then get some more rest. I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.” Karen gently placed the tray in Mike’s lap after he scooted up into a sitting position on the bed.

“Thanks mom.” Mike croaked.

Karen smiled gently before shutting his bedroom door and heading downstairs. He didn’t feel hungry at all, but Mike knew if he didn’t at least eat some of the soup his mom would sit there and make him eat all of it. Absentmindedly he ate a couple crackers while waiting for the soup to cool down.

“Mike. Come in Mike.” The crackle of his walkie-talkie broke the quiet of the bedroom. He rummaged around in the nightstand drawer, drawing the walkie-talkie out and holding down the button to respond.

“Yeah. I’m here. Over.” There was a brief silence.

“Are you sure? You sound ghastly, like some ninety-year old woman. Over.” Dustin’s asked incredulously.

“Very funny. I’m sick. Over.” Mike rolled his eyes.

“Whatever you say grandma.”

They talked over the walkie-talkies for a few more minutes, mostly about the camcorder that had just been deposited to the AV Club room that morning. It needed to be fixed ASAP because the soccer team used it for taping practices and plays. Just as they were talking about possible solutions, Dustin had to bid Mike a hasty goodbye.

“There’s someone at the door. We’ll drop off your notes after school. Gotta go. Over and out.” Dustin said quickly and the walkie-talkie went silent.

Sighing, Mike turned his attention back to his now lukewarm soup. He downed half of it as quickly as he could before getting up to use the washroom.

The floor swayed under his feet—whatever cold he’d caught was a bad one. As soon as he was done Mike headed back to bed and fell asleep once more.

The sound of the doorbell jolted Mike out of the book he was reading.

He glanced at his watch—it was already after three! It was probably his friends downstairs, but Mike knew that his mom wouldn’t let them up since he was sick. Not that he wanted any of them to catch his cold either.

Muffled voices drifted up the stairs, the sound of the door closing, and then nothing. Moments later Mike could hear his mom’s footsteps heading up the stairs before she opened the door of his bedroom.

“Michael, your friends dropped this off for you.” Karen handed the small pile of notes to him.

“They wanted to come in and see you but I told them that they would catch your cold. Be sure to tell them thank you for dropping off your notes.” Karen felt his forehead and made a tsking noise.

“Yes mom.” Mike agreed. Satisfied, Karen left his bedroom, pulling

the door shut behind her.

Mike put the book he had been reading aside and picked up the bundle of notes.

They'd worked out a system years ago that whenever one of them was sick, the rest would bring notes from the day's classes. It was a system that had only failed them once: when all four of them had been simultaneously hit with food poisoning from an ill-advised hot dog eating contest in which the hot dogs had been in Lucas's fridge for a *very* questionable period.

Mike flipped through the notes absentmindedly, immediately recognizing Will's neat printing for biology, Lucas's spiky scrawl for chemistry and Dustin's near illegible notes for English. That meant there was only one class that Mike would have to get the notes from: American History.

As much as he found the class interesting, Mike hated missing it for one reason only. Ms. Hotchkiss had a strict 'ask your classmates for the notes' rule and would not be budged. Most of his classmates turned their noses up at him. Except... El's face flashed across his thoughts.

Maybe I can ask El?

El had talked to him in class the day after they'd helped her and she had seemed friendly enough. That she hadn't outright ignored him or refused to talk to him already put her leagues ahead of the rest of their classmates. Maybe she would be kind enough to lend him her notes too? He'd have to ask her when he was well enough to go to school again.

Mike finished flipping through the notes, pausing when he reached the last of the bundle.

He frowned and picked out a set of notes he didn't recognize. The writing was neat and cursive and definitely didn't belong to any of his friends. He searched for a name on the top corner. It was dated with today's date but there was no name he could see.

Did they accidentally give me someone's paper? Mike wondered. He scanned the first few sentences out of curiosity. Realization surged through him like a bolt of lightning.

It was a continuation of Monday's topic from American History!

Stunned, Mike sat there, staring unseeingly at the notes. There was only one person he could think of in that class that would be nice enough to lend him their notes.

El must have noticed his absence from class. But did that mean she had sought his friends out just to pass her notes along? The thought sent a wave of nerves fluttering through his chest.

Mike picked up the walkie-talkie, briefly considering radioing his friends right now to ask whose notes these were, but as quickly as the thought came to him, Mike dropped the walkie-talkie. If he asked specifically about the notes he would never hear the end of it.

They already think I have a crush on El. Which I definitely don't.

As much as he really wanted to know if these were El's notes, he knew his best bet was to ask Will at the next opportunity. Out of the four of them Will seemed to be more in tune with people's feelings and unlike Dustin or Lucas, knew better when to give an honest answer than tease.

Feeling better than he had all day, Mike set to work on copying his friend's notes.

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The cold kept its horrible claws into him for the rest of the week and Mike ended up staying home both Thursday and Friday. His mom had officially deemed him under house arrest for the weekend so that he could fully get better for school on Monday.

Normally Mike sulked at the idea of being confined to the house for the weekend, but on Friday, when another set of notes from American History came with his friends at the end of the school day, he couldn't stop smiling.

...

Monday morning was bright and clear, mirroring Mike's good mood. It seemed nothing could bring him down over the weekend, even when his mom deemed him well enough to help out with the chores on Sunday.

Holly looked at Mike warily during breakfast, her pigtails bobbing as she cocked her head and studied her abnormally cheerful big brother. Mike was usually late coming down to breakfast, or still half asleep when he did make it down. To see him so alert and downright *cheerful* was making the youngest Wheeler very suspicious. Holly wasn't the only one who noticed.

"What's got you in such a good mood? It's Monday." Lucas asked grumpily as they pulled their bikes into the bike rack at school. He'd been giving Mike the side-eye the whole way to school.

"I'm just glad to be feeling better." Mike shrugged, trying to avoid his friend's suspicious gaze. Lucas eyed him disbelievingly and opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by the timely arrival of Dustin and Will.

"Hey guys." Will greeted with a sunny smile. Dustin grunted a noise that sounded vaguely greeting-like as the four of them began to walk towards the front doors.

"Will is cheerful on a Monday morning Lucas," Mike pointed out much to Will's confusion. "Why aren't you asking him about it?"

"Because Will is always cheerful." Lucas shot back. "You're normally as much of a grump as Dustin is on Monday mornings." Dustin didn't bother protesting this.

"Mike is cheerful on a Monday morning?" Will peered a little closer at his friend, as if expecting him to break out into dance or something equally silly.

"Did I miss anything while I was sick?" Mike asked, inelegantly trying to draw the topic away from why he was so cheerful. Because if his friends knew that it was only because El had lent him her

history notes (confirmed by a phone call to Will), he might be teased to death.

“Other than school being a better place because you weren’t here?” An obnoxious voice cut across their conversation and Mike could feel the familiar ball of bitter dread drop into his stomach. He glanced down at his watch: *good mood time of death? 8:07AM*. He didn’t have to turn around to know it was Troy and James snickering behind them.

“One less loser to stink up the place would be nice.” Troy continued as Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas made the mistake of pausing in their step, allowing the two bullies to catch up.

“But which one should it be James?” Troy stepped in front of Lucas. “Midnight, Frog Face, the freak, or the fairy?” He punctuated each horrible nickname with a sharp jab to their chests, pacing in front of them.

James wore an overly thoughtful face, pretending to seriously consider each of them before pointing to Will.

“Probably the fairy. I don’t want him fagging up the place anymore.” James and Troy laughed. Will flinched as though he’d been struck and anger coursed through Mike.

“Shut up James.” He spat poisonously, earning a less than impressed look from James and Troy. “Come on guys, let’s just ignore them.”

Except ignoring them *never* worked. Mike brushed by Troy and suddenly hit the ground—hard. Troy had seen the opportunity and took it, sticking his foot out for an unsuspecting Mike to trip over. The breath whooshed right out of Mike’s lungs as he face planted, pain searing his chin it scraped against the pavement.

Troy laughed loudly and high fived James.

“Later losers.” James called cheerily, leaving them behind as they headed into school without a backwards glance.

Mike’s face burned in humiliation. His friends quickly helped him up from the ground.

"You all right?" Dustin asked as he and Lucas put Mike back on his feet.

"Yeah." Mike muttered, glaring after the two bullies.

"Assholes." Lucas said darkly.

"What a great way to start the week." Will sighed unhappily.

The bullying began in middle school. Troy and James were a year ahead of them and they'd immediately chosen the four boys as easy targets to pick on. Reaching high school, the bullying had resumed at an even worse level than before. Troy had grown increasingly volatile over the years. Both he and James were on the football team and they each served as a punching bag at one time or another for the two jocks. It was never an experience they were eager to repeat. Lucas nearly had his tooth knocked out last time he'd gotten a little too lippy for Troy's liking.

"You'd better go clean yourself up Mike." Lucas pointed to his own chin. "It looks kind of bad." Mike sighed and nodded.

It was a much more subdued group of friends who entered Hawkins High.

"I'll meet you in the lab." Mike told Dustin, before wordlessly heading to the closest bathroom. Thankfully it was empty. He dropped his bag on the floor and studied the damage to his chin. There was a large scrape sluggishly bleeding, but other than his pride nothing else was damaged. Mike knew he was lucky his teeth hadn't been knocked out on the ground.

Of course Troy tripped me. Mike's hands clenched the basin of the sink.

Why couldn't he have prevented that? Why couldn't he do anything to stop Troy and James from bullying them? A bitter taste was left on Mike's tongue the more he thought about it. Nothing seemed to work against Troy and if they did try anything he only became worse... It was a frustrating situation that seemed to have no end in sight.

The sound of the warning bell jolted Mike from his thoughts. He swore under his breath and quickly finished cleaning his wound

before running out of the bathroom towards the chemistry lab.

Mike scanned the room as he walked into the American History after first period. Though he was still in a bad mood from this morning's events, he had to return El's notes. Inexplicably, his spirits lifted when he caught sight of El sitting at her desk. Her head was bowed as she studied a notebook, her wild toffee coloured curls askew as she ran a hand through her hair.

Briefly, he considered not disturbing her. The nerves in his stomach were gnawing at him, but he needed to return her notes. Swallowing his nerves, Mike put one foot in front of the other. He was being silly. She'd talked to him last Monday after all, and she had lent him her notes!

El looked up as she heard his footsteps approaching and Mike was relieved to see a small smile on her face once she realized it was him.

"Hi El." Mike greeted nervously.

"Hi Mike," El returned the greeting. "How are you feeling?"

The rest of his nerves melted away as El tucked her pencil down and gave him her full attention.

"I'm feeling much better thanks. I just wanted to return these." Mike rummaged into his backpack, retrieving her notes quickly. "Thank you for lending them to me. I really appreciate it."

"It was no problem." El assured him, a little flustered from his thanks. Warmth spread up Mike's arm when El gently took her notes back from him, their fingers brushing. He didn't have time to dwell on this for long however when El's smile tugged downwards into a frown.

"What happened to your chin?" El reached towards Mike as though she was going to touch his jaw, but seemed to realize what she was doing and dropped her hand.

Mike panicked. He didn't want to tell El the truth. He was humiliated enough that Troy had tripped him and for some reason he really didn't want El to know that he was picked on. *She'll think I'm a loser.*

“Uh... I fell on my way into school this morning.” Mike’s voice sounded strange to his own ears. It always did when he told a lie. He looked away from her, hoping that she didn’t press it anymore.

“Mike,” She said softly, waiting for him to meet her eyes.

“Yeah?” Mike turned back to her hesitantly.

“We match now.” El’s face was serious as she pointed to her chin.

Mike stared blankly at El, uncomprehending. She gently tapped her chin again, on the light pink, almost healed scrape. Mike’s lips twitched involuntarily, but he tried to mirror the seriousness on El’s face.

“We do.” He nodded seriously, “I guess this means we’re face plant friends now.” He couldn’t help but drop his gaze to El’s lips as they twitched, her turn to fight off a smile.

“Face plant friends.” El agreed before her serious façade finally cracked and she giggled. Mike couldn’t help but chuckle too, ignoring the strange flip in his stomach at the sound of her laugh.

For the second time they were both taken by surprise when Ms. Hotchkiss called the class to attention. Neither had noticed the classroom fill up.

“See you later Mike.” El gave a little wave goodbye and Mike quickly scurried across the classroom to his seat, fighting a goofy smile on his face. He noticed a few odd looks from his classmates, but he ignored them and sat down at his desk.

Mike was strangely giddy as the pre-Troy good mood seeped slowly back into him—thanks to El.

A part of him was almost thankful that he’d face planted this morning if it meant that he got to be “face plant friends” with El. He nearly snorted at the thought of such a lame name.

He took a deep breath and tried to stare at the chalkboard at the front of the classroom, but his mind kept wandering to the girl sitting behind him.

El was really nice. She was funny and kind and had cared enough to approach his friends and get her notes to Mike when she'd noticed his absence. The fact that she had even noticed his absence was strangely touching, for someone who only had three other friends his whole life it was important. Will, Dustin and Lucas were the best friends he could ever ask for, but it would be nice to get to know El more and he was fairly sure that Will at least liked her. Even Dustin seemed warmer to her now that he knew El was on the "Hawaiian shouldn't be a real pizza team". The hard sell might be Lucas in this case, only because he hadn't been with them when they'd first met El. And Lucas was always one who was wary of change.

But it was at least worth a try?

Feeling optimistic, Mike refocused on the lecture.

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The newfound optimism dwindled during the week.

Mike was at a complete loss with how to broach the subject of introducing a new member into their party.

This also included being at a loss of how to even ask this potential new party member to hang out. It never seemed like the right time. Although he saw El in class, it never seemed like the right time to bring it up. Wednesday and Friday passed by quickly and Mike knew he'd missed his window of opportunity for the week. In the end, his insecurity won over the confidence he'd gained on Monday.

Would El want to hang out with a 'bunch of nerds' like them? Not to mention wherever El went, Max would likely follow.

Max was a skateboarder (that much he knew, having seen her numerous times on her board) but Mike had never seen El on a skateboard. They were both on the track team, so that meant that they liked running. The four boys weren't exactly the most athletic types; they mixed their weekends up with their favourite game (Dungeons and Dragons), movie nights and video games at the arcade. Would those activities be something El and Max were interested in? What did they do for fun? He had no idea because he'd only ever seen them together at school.

I'll ask her next week for sure. Mike assured himself determinedly on Friday evening. Maybe before then he could get a better idea of what El did for fun.

All Friday night he'd ended up laying awake in bed, overthinking many elaborate scenarios of how to ask El and Max to hang out with them.

Mike didn't remember falling asleep that night, but whatever sleep he did get was fitful and broken as he tossed and turned.

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On Saturday morning Mike woke with a start, fumbling for his alarm clock.

SHIT. He swore mentally when he saw the time—he was going to be late to the arcade!

Scooping up his pants from the floor, Mike nearly toppled over in his haste to get dressed. He finished dressing as quickly as he could and flew down the stairs into the kitchen.

"Good morning Michael." Karen greeted in a surprised tone when Mike barreled down the stairs at 9:30AM. At a minimum he slept in until 10AM on Saturdays, seeing him before then was a rarity in the Wheeler household.

"Morning mom." Mike greeted with a nod, heading for the fridge as his mother studied him from across the room. He had maybe ten minutes before he'd have to be out the door.

"Where are you off to so early?" Karen watched amusedly as her son balanced the peanut butter, jam and carton of milk haphazardly in his arms before making his way towards the toaster.

"Arcade." Mike said distractedly. "Will's mom asked him for help with something tonight so we can't go then."

Saturday nights at the arcade had become the norm for the boys since the beginning of their freshman year. It was a rarity to miss a Saturday night, but they'd compromised. Instead of going without

Will in the evening, they'd go as soon as the arcade opened at ten so they could all take a whack at the standing high scores.

Mike quickly finished making his breakfast and scarfed it down.

"Michael. Manners please." Karen scolded as her son nearly inhaled his food.

"Sorry mom." Mike apologized, but by then he was already finished and halfway to the sink. He cleaned up swiftly, washing his plate and setting it on the drying rack before he ran towards the door.

"Bye mom!" Mike called, not waiting for a response before shutting the front door. It was a crisp September morning; his breath trailed in wispy clouds behind him. Mike grabbed his bike from the back, walking it over the grass and onto the driveway.

A blur raced by and Mike swore.

"Slow poke!" Lucas taunted as he sped by, laughing when Mike quickly fumbled to hop onto his bike. Working his legs hard, he tore after his friend.

"Good morning to you too," Mike grumbled as he struggled to catch up with Lucas. The two of them peddled hard all the way to the arcade, reaching there in a flurry of screeching bike tires and laboured breaths.

Lucas looked to Mike, victory written across his features.

"You had a head start." Mike remarked bitterly, only growing more irritated Lucas's smile widened.

"Maybe you're just not as fast as you used to be." Lucas goaded. "Let's have a rematch some time to see who the winner really is." Mike couldn't help but grin.

"You're on." He agreed. Moments later, Will and Dustin pulled up to the bike rack in front of the arcade, similarly huffing and puffing from a hard bike ride.

"Son of a bitch," Dustin swore as he and Will dismounted. "We really

need to think about getting our drivers licenses.”

“That’s another one for me Dustin.” Will said happily, parking his bike.

“Dammit.” Dustin muttered, parking his own bike roughly. Why Dustin kept challenging Will to a race was truly a mystery because he almost always lost. He had to be running low on comics at the rate he lost to Will!

“Come on, you can try to win it back at Dig Dug.” Will offered, his words clearing Dustin of his foul mood instantaneously.

“You’re going down.” Dustin boasted as the four of them headed towards the entrance to the arcade.

The Palace Arcade was eerily empty when they walked in at approximately 10:15AM. The usual lights and sounds from the games were familiar, but the lack of other teenagers and kids was not.

The four paused at the entrance, marveling in what seemed like a “ghost” arcade. Mike was half waiting for tumbleweed to roll by, as if to truly confirm how empty the place was. The usual bustling excitement of Saturday evening was nowhere to be found, but they’d make up for it.

“Sweet! No lines!” Lucas said excitedly, immediately racing over to Dragon’s Lair. Dustin, Will and Mike quickly followed suit.

Mike opted to stay and watch Lucas’s progress on Dragon’s Lair. Dustin and Will made their way to Dig Dug, so Dustin could redeem himself from his prior loss.

The familiar sounds of Dragon’s Lair fired up and Lucas’s game face was on. Mike didn't dare break his friend’s concentration, cheering him on at the appropriate moments. As the climax neared, with Princess Daphne’s dreamy voice telling Dirk the Daring to “use the magic sword!” The both knew this was do or die. And suddenly, as Dirk the Daring threw his sword through the chest of the dragon, causing the creature to collapse, Lucas let out a triumphant whoop of excitement.

"I must have beat Dustin's high score!" Lucas exclaimed excitedly. They waited impatiently as Dirk the Daring got a nice big smooch from Princess Daphne in thanks for the rescue.

"As if you would beat my score!" Dustin said a moment later. He and Will must have finished their Dig Dug competition. They hovered beside Mike and Lucas, Dustin jostling to see the screen.

"You're just worried I've toppled your Dragon's Lair dynasty." Lucas remarked, his eyes were still trained to the screen.

Sure enough, the high scores popped up for Lucas to enter his name... in the secondary spot. He groaned disappointedly as Dustin let out a cheer, which abruptly died with a strangled sound in his throat when he saw HIS name, previously in the number one spot of Dragon's Lair, in the number *three spot*! The four boys stared in transfixed horror at the name atop of the list: MADMAX.

"WHAT!" Dustin gasped.

"No!" Lucas groaned woefully. Will and Mike let out equally disappointed noises.

He entered his name into the second spot with a dejected look. The true prize was stolen right from under his nose so his victory over Dustin meant nothing.

"What the shit! Mad Max hasn't come to Dragon's Lair before! He had to take that from us too?" Dustin lamented the unfairness of it all.

The name MADMAX had been taunting the four of them for nearly two years at the arcade. It was a name that had appeared suddenly and claimed the top spot on most of the arcade games high score charts. Just when they'd reclaim a spot, MADMAX always seemed to be a step ahead of them, just as quickly and even more brutally taking back the top spot. It was driving the four boys nuts, Lucas and Dustin especially.

"We knew it was only a matter of time." Mike sighed, feeling the vibrant excitement that had been palpable only moments before whoosh right out the front doors of the arcade.

“Hey wait. I was here after school on Thursday.” Dustin was clearly thinking aloud because he didn't appear to be looking for comments. “Which means this is recent! Really recent! We're narrowing in on this bastard!” He said excitedly.

“Right. So literally anytime between when you left the arcade on Thursday evening until now.” Lucas scoffed, unimpressed.

“I left the arcade at closing.” Dustin said proudly, “so that just means it's between Friday and—” The boys were startled from their serious conversation by an exclamation of excitement that certainly didn't come from any of them.

“Yes! Take that!” Eyes wide, the four exchanged astonished looks. It sounded as though the voice were only a few rows away.

There was someone else here? Identically comical looks of understanding formed on their faces.

“Now!” Dustin, Lucas, Will and Mike all shouted in excitement.

Like a small herd of elephants they ran, nearly tripping over one another at the end of the aisle.

“Split up!” Dustin shouted, he and Lucas took the left and Mike and Will cut to the right.

Mike and Will raced around the corner and all but flattened El Hopper.

She gave a startled noise before landing firmly on her backside with a soft “oof!” Mike and Will sprawled on the ground in front of her. It was El who recovered from her surprise first.

“Mike? Will?” She peered confusedly between the two of them. “What are you doing here?”

“Sorry El!” Will was the first to remember his manners, scrambling off the ground to offer his hand to her. Will nudged Mike out of his stunned stupor and he quickly clambered up as though jabbed with a hot poker.

"It's okay, no harm done." El smiled at Will before turning to Mike with a cocked eyebrow. "Are we going to keep running into each other like this?" She teased. Mike grinned bashfully, trying to ignore the strange swell of nervous flutters in his stomach.

"It's always nice to run into you." The words Mike believed he'd only thought were passing between his lips before he could fully process what he'd just said. He'd meant it sincerely—all week he had struggled with a way to ask El to hang out with them—but now she was here! But the words came out so *flirty*.

Even Will turned to him with a shocked face.

Oh god. Oh god. Oh god. She was going to think he was such a dweeb. Why did he say that?

"I mean—it's nice to see you!" Mike back peddled hard, flustered and miserable.

"G-good to know." El was clearly trying and failing to stop a blush from lighting her cheeks.

Mike wilted at the sudden awkwardness. He didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable and was certain he'd done just that. Had he just blown any chances of having El as a friend?

Will was desperately trying not to laugh at the two responses playing out in front of him. However, there were more pressing things to deal with right now. They were on a mission after all.

"El, are you Mad Max?" Will asked, snapping both Mike and El out of their embarrassed dazes.

Dustin and Lucas raced around the corner at that moment; only hearing the words "Mad Max" and not noticing the confused look that spread across El's face.

"YOU'RE Mad Max? We've been looking for you for the last year!" Dustin gasped, as though he had just learned the absolutely most shocking betrayal ever.

"What! You're..." Lucas trailed off unsurely.

“El Hopper.” She said helpfully, holding out her hand to Lucas who, out of sheer muscle memory alone shook it in his surprise. “But no, I’m not Mad Max. That’s—“

“Me. What do you want, stalkers?” The new voice took the four boys completely off guard, their heads swivelled as one to face the figure of Max Mayfield. She stood at the other end of the aisle, hands on her hips and pinned them with an icy stare.

“You? You’re Mad Max?” Lucas couldn’t keep the disbelief from his voice.

“I thought we’d established that.” Max rolled her eyes.

“But you’re on the track team!” Dustin said next, looking as though he’d been dealt another blow. “And you’re at the arcade?” It was practically unheard of! Max was a jock. Why on earth was she here at the arcade? Dustin’s head spun like a top.

“Track season doesn’t even officially start until spring.” Max huffed. “And all the high scores were just so easy to beat.” She smirked evilly and there are a variety of responses all within an instance.

“How dare you!” Dustin gasped, outraged.

“You’re incredible.” Lucas said in what can only be described as a dreamy tone, not unlike Princess Daphne’s.

“It couldn’t have been that easy!” Will insisted.

“Villain!” Mike accused, but is unable to fight a smile off at the absurdity of the situation. Because of course their nemesis, MADMAX, the name that had haunted them for the last year and a half was *Max Mayfield*. Max Mayfield who had moved to Hawkins almost two years ago, which was about the same time MADMAX began to show up on the high scores of their beloved arcade games.

“How did we not realize this sooner?” Will groaned, realizing just how dumb they’d been. All the evidence had been there but they’d just assumed it was a guy who went under the name MADMAX and their bias had blinded them to the answer. Mr. Clarke would be ashamed of them.

“Mad Max? Maxine Mayfield. Ugh.” Dustin groaned.

“It’s *Max*. Call me Maxine one more time and it’s not just your high score I’ll beat.” Max warned darkly.

“Max Mayfield.” Dustin amended, not particularly feeling like he wanted to get beat up today. He very much remembered who the redhead’s older brother was: Billy. Billy had nearly mowed the four friends down in his fancy Camaro more than once, laughing as he drove away after they’d dove out of his path in desperation. If Max belonged to the same family as that psycho, Dustin definitely wanted to remain on her good side.

“How come we’ve never seen you here before?” Mike asked, still annoyed by Max’s jab (but more annoyed with himself that it had taken so long to solve the mystery).

“I’ve seen you around here.” Max shrugged, glancing away as though she’d said something she hadn’t meant to.

“Why did you suddenly start on Dragon’s Lair?” Lucas asked next.

“I was bored of the other ones. What is this? An interrogation?” Max looked to El who stepped in loyally to take some of the heat off of her friend.

“Max, this is Dustin, Will and Mike.” El pointed them out individually, “they helped me out when I rolled my ankle last Sunday. And this is Lucas.” There were some grudging introductions going around as they each waved or nodded at Max.

“Can I watch you play Dragon’s Lair?” Lucas asked suddenly, the shock of learning whom MADMAX was finally seemed to have worn off and now he was just eager to see her technique. Max’s eyes momentarily met with El’s and there was a silent exchange between the two girls.

“Yeah sure. But on your coin since I already beat it.” Max agreed with a smirk. Lucas nodded and they both wandered back towards the game.

“I’m coming too! No way I’ll let you get ahead of me Lucas.” Dustin

scrambled after them, leaving just Will, Mike and El standing there.

“I’m going to work on beating Lucas’s score in Galaga.” Will said suddenly, departing in another direction in the arcade.

Mike glanced shyly in El’s direction, that weird, nervous fluttering feeling returned with a vengeance now that it was just the two of them.

“Er... would you like to play something?” He asked hopefully, not wanting to rejoin the others just yet. Now was his chance to get to know El a little more. Mike was still in shock about his good luck in running into El (quite literally) at the arcade. Did this mean that they shared more in common than he initially thought?

“I’m pretty bad at all the games here.” El admitted and Mike could feel his hopes dash down the drain.

“I’m mostly here because Max calls me her ‘good luck charm’...” El looked thoughtful for a moment. “But there is one game I’m good at. Would you like to come watch?” She asked, her brown eyes swimming with hope. Mike swallowed heavily, trying to ignore the flip of his stomach.

He managed a nod and El led him towards the front of the arcade. His curiosity peaked when she stopped in front of the brightly lit “teddy picker” as Will called it.

It was a claw crane. As always, the prize area was tantalizingly stocked with a mix of toys, stuffies and even candy.

“This one?” Mike asked, confused.

Claw cranes were so tricky, he and the guys had only wasted their coins a handful of times. They’d only won a small prize once and that had been good enough for Mike. The toy always slipped from the claw’s grasp before they could drop it in the prize bin and it was frustrating to no end.

“Yes.” El nodded assuredly. “What would you like? I’ll get it for you.” She sounded so confident that Mike couldn’t help but be impressed. He peered for a moment into the brightly lit box.

“That one.” Mike pointed to an oversized fluffy pink teddy bear holding a heart. It was the first thing that caught his attention and the teddy bear didn’t look like it was too wedged in.

A fiercely determined look worked its way onto El’s features. Mike mentally dubbed this her “game face”. Without further ado, she deposited her coin into the slot and the two of them watched as the claw sprang to life. El carefully maneuvered her way over to the coveted pink teddy bear. Mike was trying to watch the claw’s movements, but he found himself distracted by the determined look on El’s face and then the flash of excitement in her eyes.

Abruptly El hammered down on the ‘lower claw’ button with the most confidence Mike had ever seen anyone do anything.

Holy shit. Mike’s heart thudded against his rib cage inexplicably.

He ripped his gaze from her face and watched with astonishment as the claw firmly snapped up the pink teddy, and slowly began its agonizing ascent.

This was normally where Mike, Dustin, Will and Lucas always lost their prize. But El remained starkly confident as the two of them watched the claw ascend, and slowly move over to deposit the prize in the drop box. The claw released the teddy bear with a snap and El happily fished out her prize.

“Here you go.” She said cheerily, thrusting the large pink teddy bear into Mike’s arms.

“For me?” Mike asked, astonished.

“I won him for you.” El said, sounding less sure of herself. “I could always take him home if you don’t want—”

“No! I want him!” Mike assured her, nodding so hard his teeth clacked. El giggled at Mike’s over exuberant nod and his heart began beating so loudly he was certain she could hear it.

What is wrong with me?

“What will you name him?” El asked, looking down at the pink teddy.

“How about Lovebug?” Piped up Dustin, “because Mike’s been bitten by the Loooove—OW!”

Will the Wise, wisely put his foot down on Dustin’s toes, stopping him from ever finishing that sentence.

Mike’s cheeks burned brightly and he glared at Dustin, who whistled and avoided his poisonous gaze. He hadn’t even noticed Will and Dustin’s arrival. Here he was, holding a big pink teddy bear that El had won for him.

Wasn’t it normally the other way around? Should he have tried to win a teddy bear for El? But when El looked back at him expectantly with her sincere brown eyes, Mike decided that he didn’t care.

“What about Pinkie?” Mike cringed at the awful name as soon as it left his lips.

Pinkie? Really? He couldn’t think of anything better? His six-year-old sister could have come up with a better name!

“Very fitting.” El agreed, fighting a smile. Will nodded and Dustin stayed wisely silent.

“Are Max and Lucas still playing Dragon’s Lair?” El turned to Dustin. More teens and kids were starting to arrive to the arcade, making it harder to see where exactly their friends were.

“Kind of. Lucas is taking a turn again and Max is cheering him on...or heckling him. I can’t tell.” Dustin shrugged.

As if on cue, they could hear a distant “no, no, no!” (Lucas) followed by the derisive “*really?* You died there *again?*” (Max). The four of them headed towards the Dragon’s Lair game, a dejected Lucas and a cheery Max coming into view.

“My score still stands.” Max pointed out proudly when she noticed El. El high-fived her friend wordlessly before the red head glanced at her watch on her wrist.

“Shit. I didn’t realize what time it is. I have to get going.” Max sighed apologetically, looking at El. “Are you good to go?”

“I’m good.” El agreed.

Max reached for her trusty skateboard, having left it leaning between Dragon’s Lair and the neighbouring game.

“Later stalkers.” Max smirked, tucking her board under her arm and heading towards the front door.

Mike didn’t bother making an indignant noise with the rest of his friends, somehow knowing that the nickname she’s bestowed on them will stick regardless if they protest it or not.

“This was fun,” El fiddled with the hem of her plaid shirt. “Maybe we could meet at the arcade again sometime?” Her tone is so hopeful that all of them (including Lucas) find themselves bobbing their heads in agreement.

“See you later.” She bids them goodbye with a happy smile, joining Max who waited impatiently by the door for her.

Just like that, they’re gone.

A moment passes before Lucas asks, “a teddy bear, really?” He smirked at Mike.

“El won it for me.” Mike said defensively.

“And Mike named it Pinkie.” Will added helpfully, earning a glare from Mike himself.

“I still can’t believe that Mad Max is Max Mayfield.” Lucas blurted as they start to head out towards their bikes. Their pockets have taken a deep enough hit for today at the arcade.

“I can’t believe we didn’t figure it out sooner.” Mike complained.

“It was so obvious.” Will agreed.

“I can’t believe you called her incredible.” Dustin said, doing a poor imitation of Lucas’s voice.

“See you guys tomorrow.” Lucas said quickly, ignoring Dustin’s

comment. "I have to run to the store to pick up something for my mom." With that, the four friends bid each other goodbye and headed off in different directions.

Riding home with a large pink teddy bear tucked under his arm was a new experience for Mike.

He ignored the jeers or rude comments that came his way, pedaling hard and mulling over the events of this morning even harder. He knew it had been incredibly lucky to run into El at the arcade. Although it seemed like she didn't play the video games much herself, it was nice to know that she apparently enjoyed watching Max play them.

But I can't always rely on luck, Mike thought seriously.

El had once again solved a problem for him in that department. The way she'd shyly asked if they could meet at the arcade again sometime and all of his friends agreeing were a miracle in itself.

Next time for sure... he would have to ask her instead.

...

Later that afternoon as Mike helped his father clean out the garage, he concluded two things: first, the mystery of MADMAX had finally been solved.

Secondly, Mike was beginning to think the idea that the six of them could be friends wasn't so crazy after all.

4. I Melt with You

Hopper had a rare Sunday morning off and El planned to make the best of it.

Officer Powell promised he would keep things in check at the station, and Hopper trusted Flo to call him if anything got out of hand before lunchtime.

Tip toeing as quietly as she could into the kitchen, El decided the best (and safest) way to summon Hopper from his bed was by putting on a pot of coffee. As the aroma of the coffee pot wafted throughout the cabin, she dug through the freezer for the stash of Eggo waffles.

Much like a bear roused from hibernation by the aroma of spring in the air, so too was the Chief of Police summoned from sleep by the fragrance of his beloved coffee. She could hear her adoptive father stirring in his bedroom and El popped the first set of waffles in the toaster.

The bedroom door swung open just as the first Eggos popped out of the toaster. El held them out for Hopper to take.

“Morning kid.” He greeted gruffly. Hopper looked bright eyed and bushy tailed as he often did before his first cup of coffee.

“Morning Hop.” El greeted, holding the plate of waffles out to him. Hopper appeared taken aback at the offered plate, but accepted it anyways.

“You must be in a good mood,” Hopper mused, pouring himself a cup of coffee. “I never get the first Eggos.” El rolled her eyes at his teasing tone.

“I am in a good mood.” She admitted, reloading the toaster. Hopper settled down at the kitchen table, where the previous day’s paper was waiting for him.

“Oh yeah? What’s got you in such a good mood before the crack of noon on a Sunday?” Hopper asked, ignoring the paper for now in

favour of his breakfast.

“I think Max and I made some new friends.” El said happily. Hopper raised his eyebrows.

“The Byers boy and his friends?” It was a statement more than a question.

El nodded, distracted for a moment as her waffles finished toasting. She snagged the syrup from the counter and placed it between her and Hop.

“They’re nice.” She said, cutting into her warm, Eggo goodness with a blissful sigh.

Hopper was quiet for a moment as he mulled over what his adoptive daughter had just said. She and Max were becoming friends with four, young, teenage boys and suddenly his life flashed before his eyes.

He remembered what he was like at El’s age. His mom thought he’d joined the debate team but meanwhile he was having sex with Chrissy Carpenter in the back of his dad’s Oldsmobile. But, as Hopper thought back to last Sunday when he’d located a passed out El sleeping in Joyce Byers’ living room... those boys didn't seem much like Hop at their age.

Then again, he knew any kid of Joyce Byers’ was going to turn out a good egg. And typically one good egg in turn surrounded itself with other good eggs.

“We ran into them at the arcade yesterday.” El explained between bites of her waffles, “it turns out they’ve been searching for Max for over a year!”

“Max? Why?” Hopper frowned.

“She’s been destroying their high scores on every game and it was driving them crazy because they had no idea it was Max.” El laughed and Hopper chuckled.

As much as he griped about how much time Max spent over at the

cabin, he did have a soft spot for the feisty Californian. She was a good friend to El, so she was on Hopper's good side.

"So. You're going to start hanging out with these boys more often?" Hopper asked casually, watching for El's reaction.

"I'd like to. They seem like good people and I think Max likes them well enough..." El trailed off, "but maybe it won't work out." Hopper watched as El shrank a little in self-doubt and he couldn't have that.

"They would be lucky to have you and Mayfield as friends. Especially because it seems like she could teach them a thing or two about video games." Hopper smiled.

El returned the smile appreciatively, feeling better about voicing her concerns aloud.

They ate in a comfortable silence, devouring their breakfast.

"We don't need to have the 'birds and the bees' talk again, do we?"

El choked on her Eggo.

"W-what! Hop!" El quickly became annoyed when she saw that he was laughing at her.

"I'm joking kid, neither of us want a repeat of *that* lecture." Both shuddered involuntarily at the memory. It had been possibly longest hour of both their lives and El could hardly meet Hopper's eye for almost a week after. Learning about the birds and the bees from your adoptive dad (although a necessary topic to learn about) was a nightmare she was in no hurry to repeat.

El snatched one of his Eggos in retaliation for bringing up the uncomfortable memory. Hopper sighed and got up to put waffle in the toaster.

As Hopper fixed himself another Eggo, El mulled over why her adoptive father thought she would need that talk again.

El spent the rest of breakfast trying to ignore the picture of freckles sprinkled under entrancingly dark eyes flitting across her thoughts.

...

Monday morning brought a torrential downpour of rain. Hopper did his best to drop El as close to the front doors as possible, but by the time she'd made it through the doors she was definitely wet. She sighed and rung her sweater out as best as she could before hanging it in her locker to dry.

"Morning El." Max greeted cheerily.

"Morning Max." El returned her friend's greeting, doing a double take as she caught sight of her friend.

Max definitely got caught in the rain. Her long red hair was weighed down, as though she'd only just gotten out of the shower. Her clothes were soaked right through down to her sodden sneakers.

"Did you skateboard to school in this?" El asked incredulously, watching as a puddle steadily grew around Max's feet. The redhead shrugged.

"I didn't realize how bad it was until I left the house. After that, I didn't think Neil would let me in his car. You know how he is." Max's stepfather Neil was extremely anal about the state of his car. El knew that her best friend was absolutely correct. Max opened her locker and pulled a few things out, including her bundle of gym clothes.

El wordlessly took the dry clothes from Max and waited for her friend to finish retrieving things from her locker.

"Come on." Max motioned to the left, leading the two of them towards the girls' washroom.

Max headed into one of the bathroom stalls. El leaned against the sink for a moment before dipping her head down to make sure that no one else was in the other stalls.

"What did you think of Will, Dustin, Lucas and Mike?" El asked as breezily as she could.

She and Max hadn't really had a chance to talk since Saturday. Max had to go home right after the arcade because it was Billy's weekend

to visit (he normally came overnight on a Saturday for one weekend per month). Max *despised* the weekends that Billy visited, but she obeyed her mother's request to spend the Saturday night at home with the family.

"They're nerds." Max called back, her voice slightly muffled. El snorted and rolled her eyes. There was a wet slap as Max tossed her soaked clothes overtop the bathroom stall door.

"Says Mad Max, high score video game champion." El could hear Max mumbling something unflattering and a moment later the stall door banged open. The Californian emerged, wearing grey sweat pants and a grey tee shirt that read 'Hawkins High School' in green. She ignored El for a moment, fixing her wet hair into a loose bun at the base of her neck so it wouldn't get her gym clothes damp.

"They're alright." Max finally grumbled, rolling her eyes when El beamed at her.

"Did Lucas enjoy his private Dragon's Lair lessons?" El asked slyly, eyeing Max for her reaction. Max's cheeks coloured before she glared at El.

"It wasn't a private lesson," Max tried to snap but it just came out as a bit of a whine. "Dustin was there too." El couldn't wipe the smile off of her face and tried to hide it from her friend, knowing it would only frustrate her even more.

"Well, maybe we could meet them again at the arcade? You could give Lucas a real private lesson this time?" El couldn't resist one more little jab. Max scowled at her, but the pinkness in her cheeks had yet to go away.

"I guess we could meet them there again. But not so I can give Lucas a private lesson." Max insisted hotly.

The bathroom door opened and they quickly changed the topic to something school related and harmless as more girls came into the washroom.

Max gathered her wet clothes into a ball and the two headed out

towards their lockers.

As Max put her stuff away, El could scarcely contain her excitement. She'd basically gotten Max to agree to hang out with the boys again, which was a huge relief.

This relief however was short lived when Max slyly said: "I guess you'll have to learn how to skateboard to the arcade."

She laughed at El's panicked face just as they entered their first period classroom.

...

Class flew by that morning. El barely had time to bid Mike a quick "hello" in their shared second period before Ms. Hotchkiss called the class to attention and suddenly they were off on a very fast paced lecture. El feared if her pencil slipped even once she'd be left in the dust. So when the bell rang for lunch, it was a surprise.

Max was waiting for El outside her history classroom after the bell rang, which was also a surprise.

"Mr. Mundy let us out a minute early." She explained upon seeing El's questioning glance. "And it's still raining. So I guess it's the cafeteria today." Max sighed unhappily.

The two girls stopped briefly at their lockers to grab their packed lunches, neither looking forward to having lunch in the cafeteria. The Hawkins High cafeteria was possibly El's least favourite place in the school. It was loud and rowdy and more often than not there was always some kind of spectacle happening. The food was atrocious, she had only forgotten her packed lunch once and that was all it took to never let that mistake happen again.

El and Max weren't paying attention as they came around a corner and bumped right into Will Byers. He lost his grip on the videotapes gathered in his arms and they clattered to the floor loudly in the confusion.

"Sorry Will." El apologized as she realized who they'd bumped into. She and Max quickly kneeled down to help pick up the videotapes.

"I should have been watching where I was going." Will smiled in thanks as Max and El handed him the remainder of the tapes.

"Where are you going?" Max asked curiously, eyeing the sizeable pile of black tapes. They were stacked right up to Will's chin.

"Oh! AV Club." Will said happily, but upon seeing their confused faces he added, "it's the Audiovisual Club. It's only Lucas, Mike, Dustin and I." He looked a little embarrassed. "We eat lunch in the club room most days so we can work on our projects."

"Would you like a hand carrying those?" El offered. Will looked pleasantly surprised.

"Sure! If you don't mind?" El handed Max her bagged lunch and took half of the load in his arms carefully.

"What are these for?" El asked as Will led the way towards the AV Club room.

"They're old tapes a lot of the sports clubs use. They asked us to set them up so they can record over, but we have to check the dates first and make sure the footage isn't too recent." Will explained. "We do a lot of small things like this to keep the club going."

They reached a door towards the farthest corner of the high school. Glass shelves showcasing years of past academic and sports achievements had a thick coating of dust. El hadn't realized this part of the school was even here! And judging by the look on Max's face, she hadn't known this part of the school existed either.

Will stopped in front of a bright blue door, the edges flaking paint and the metal handle dull. There was a small nameplate beside the door that read *AV Club*, but aside from that there was nothing else notable.

There were muffled voices coming from behind the door and they stopped when Will knocked in a predetermined pattern. Five sharp raps followed by three slightly spaced knocks.

After a few moments the door swung open, revealing Lucas Sinclair.

“Finally Will!” Lucas exclaimed, stopping short when he caught sight of the two girls.

“Just through here, follow me.” Will said cheerily, pushing past his surprised friend.

“Hi Lucas.” El greeted, following Will into the clubroom. Max also said hello and Lucas finally managed to stammer a greeting.

“Right here is great.” Will placed his pile of tapes down on the large table in the middle of the room and prompted El to do the same.

“Hi El!” Mike jumped up, recovering from his brief surprise but seemingly happy to see her.

“Hi Mike.” El greeted happily, “hello Dustin.” She added with a nod.

Max nodded at the two boys but was preoccupied in looking around their clubroom.

It was a cramped space, there was a window on the far side but shelves and the table took up most of the room. There was also another door to the left, likely a closet of some kind. The shelves were stocked with a wide array of equipment. Video recording devices, audio equipment and television sets were just a few.

The table seemed to be where most of the action happened, there was just enough cleared space around the edges to eat lunch. The rest of the table was occupied by pieces of equipment in varying stages of repair.

“So this is stalker headquarters.” Max stated matter-of-factly.

“We’re not stalkers.” Dustin protested. “We only watched you on the high score boards for like two ye...” He trailed off at Max’s growing smirk, realizing that he was only digging his hole deeper instead of proving a point.

“Well, I guess we should get going to the cafeteria.” El said, though she didn’t really want to leave. It was a good opportunity to stay and learn some more about their club. El hadn’t even known there was an AV Club!

Before she and Max could take a step towards the door, Will stopped them.

“Why don’t you stay and have lunch with us?” He offered. El glanced hopefully to Max to see if she was okay with it and her friend didn’t disappoint her.

“That would be great. Uh... But it looks like you only have four chairs?” El glanced around awkwardly. It was Lucas who came to the rescue this time.

“We’ve got some spare stools, hold on. Dustin come give me a hand.” Lucas headed into the other door in the clubroom. It looked like it was jammed full with all sorts of carts and spare desks. The two boys rummaged around and then finally emerged triumphant with some old dusty stools.

“You take the chairs, we’ll sit on these.” Lucas offered graciously. Max nodded and flopped down in the chair Dustin had previously been sitting in much to his annoyance.

It was a bit of a tight squeeze with the six of them in the small clubroom. El found herself sandwiched between Max and Mike as they unpacked their lunches and the conversation picked up once more.

She enjoyed the easy flow of banter between Dustin, Lucas and Will as they talked about the projects on the table. Max asked a few questions here and there and El was happy to see that her friend was actually quite interested in their club activities. Though their conversation was still a little awkward sounding because they weren’t used to talking to one another this much, El couldn’t help but feel cheery.

They may not be the best of friends yet, but she hoped that would change.

Did someone have to announce that they were officially friends?

As El pondered this, her leg brushed against Mike’s. She didn’t think anything of the contact because her and Max often brushed up

against one another. El was so absorbed with her thoughts, wondering if they needed ‘official friendship badges’ to qualify as friends that she didn’t even notice how pink Mike’s cheeks had become.

“Are you going to be at the arcade this weekend?” Lucas asked Max, who nodded.

“Probably. But I might be a little late because I’m teaching El how to skateboard.” Max explained with a devious look, drawing her best friend back into the conversation.

“I’m going to die.” El groaned miserably.

“You’ll be fine.” Max scoffed.

“How long have you been skateboarding?” Will asked curiously as he finished eating an apple. “You make it look so easy.”

“Since I was eight.” Max proudly explained. “My dad taught me.” El glanced to Max as her friend’s voice wavered. She clearly hadn’t meant to add the last part.

“Max has been trying to get me to learn since I met her.” El jumped in before anyone could say anything else.

“What made you change your mind now?” Dustin sounded as though he’d rather cut off his legs before getting on a skateboard.

El winced at his question—she’d walked right into that one—how could she tell them that the only reason she’d finally agreed to Max’s skateboarding demands was so Max would agree to meet them?

There was a longer, awkward silence as El floundered.

“Blackmail.” Max, who recovered from her unintentional slip came to El’s rescue this time with a victorious grin.

Dustin, Will and Lucas all made noises of understanding. El let out the breath she was holding. She was happy to let the conversation resume without her as the four of them talked about other blackmail situations, lost bets and dares.

It was then that El realized Mike had been uncharacteristically quiet this whole time. She turned to him. He appeared a little dazed and El looked on in concern when she saw how pink his cheeks were.

“Are you feeling okay Mike?” El asked worriedly, leaning a little closer so no one would hear her.

Mike’s dark eyes met hers and El suddenly forgot what she had been asking. Her gaze dropped, flitting from freckle to freckle across his high cheekbones.

Pretty. The word whispers through her thoughts, and El can’t seem to look away from him. She finds her gaze lowering to his pink lips and her heartbeat quickens a little.

Mike gasped a little and El finally managed to rip her eyes from his lips and register the shock on his face.

Oh shit. Did I say that out loud?

She is afraid to look at Mike and is immensely relieved that no one else seems to have realized something’s amiss as their conversation continues.

“Pretty?” Mike stuttered, his eyes wide and he regards her with a look that El cannot possibly describe. It is overwhelming and endearing and her heart aches from it. She decides in an instant that the only way to go about this is to be honest.

“You’re pretty.” El confirmed with much more confidence than she actually felt. She was very aware that they have an audience in the room and she’d rather not accidentally embarrass Mike in front of his friends. She is almost certain her cheeks will burst into flames at any moment, but Mike still has not said a word.

“Um... really pretty.” She added, wondering if she just royally screwed her chances at getting to know Mike.

What the hell had come over her? He was going to think she was such a *weirdo*. But it was too late now. The words were out, hanging in the strangely private moment between the two of them and there was no taking them back.

“You’re pretty too...really pretty.” Mike is too shy to look at El when he says this, his face glowing an impressive shade of bright pink but she can hear the sincerity in his words and it makes her heart leap.

A few moments later their friends draw the two of them back into the conversation. Max peers at El strangely, surprised to see how beet red her friend’s face is but doesn’t say anything.

Lunchtime passes quickly and with lively conversation. The only ones who seem rather quiet today are Mike and El.

When the lunch bell rings and they part ways to hurry to class, Max doesn’t say anything when El nearly walks into one of the shelves outside of the AV Club in a daze.

Meanwhile, Dustin, Lucas and Will are at a complete loss for words when Mike all but clotheslined himself on the AV Club table with a loud bang! They wordlessly exchanged confused looks as Mike rambled about being “half-asleep” or something and they help him up.

When El sat down for her afternoon classes, she lowered her head on the cool desk, her face still burning.

Never has she been so embarrassed and yet oddly satisfied in her life.

Mike’s shocked look makes El think that he’s not used to getting compliments. But he is pretty. With his dark, fathomless eyes and fluffy hair. And the freckles! They’re different from Max’s but no less entrancing, spattered across his high cheekbones.

She *really* liked drawing that kind of reaction of him. The surprise lighting his eyes, the subtle parting of his lips and... he’d called her pretty too.

Paying attention in class ends up once more a losing battle.

...

Luckily by Tuesday the rain stopped, meaning El and Max could eat their lunch outside. This was indeed a stroke of luck because El highly doubted she could eat lunch like a normal person right now if

she were in the same room as Mike.

Even more exciting, El was finally able to attend cross-country running practice for the first time in two weeks. Her ankle had healed up nicely through her careful regime of icing and elevation. With all the confusing feelings El had been experiencing lately, she was going stir crazy for a good run.

And get in a good run is what she did. As soon as Coach Kline laid out the route for Tuesday's run and said "go!" El was long gone.

She loved to run. The cross-country team had drafted her only a short time after the track team tryouts. The track season didn't officially begin until the springtime, so both teams were happy to have her since cross-country ended in mid November.

El loved both forms of running differently. For cross-country it was the feeling of the autumn air pressing against her skin, the sound of her feet pounding the dirt as she ran, and the burning in her muscles. At times, she lost herself in the rhythm of her run and it felt as though she was flying.

For track, it was the track firmly beneath her running shoes, the cheers from your teammates and the thrill of coming around one of the curves or seeing the finish line on your last lap.

Running was something she could ever live without. It was a method of sanity for her, something that both exhilarated El and allowed an outlet for her emotions, both negative and positive.

El's runs for the week were powered by the muddle of confusing feelings that had been cropping up around Mike. On Tuesday El's run had been driven by her coming to terms with how she'd called Mike pretty. Of course she had meant it. The more she saw Mike, the more El couldn't stop admiring his cheekbones, the slope of his cute nose, his long inky eyelashes... And Mike thought she was pretty too. El could have kissed him in that moment. (Coach Kline had to holler at El to come back, she'd started to run the route twice because she was so lost in her thoughts).

On Wednesday El's face burned when she thought back to lunch on

Monday, thinking about how she couldn't stop looking at Mike's lips. And however brief, the thought of how easy it would be to close the distance between them had flit across her thoughts. *But why?* Fuelled by these feelings, El had practically flown through her run.

Coach Kline meanwhile, was very impressed with her runs. On Thursday he'd whistled and said, "wow Hopper, I think that was your best run yet!" As he looked at his watch when El raced through the route in record time.

Trying to outrun your own emotions would do that.

Friday was no better. El was grateful that she had hardly seen Mike that week. They'd said hello in class, but both of them had been busy and she was relieved because she was not confident in her ability to put more than a sentence together around him.

Max had been very patient with El's weirdness all week, but she knew that patience was waning. One could only walk into inanimate objects so many times without rousing suspicion. And when Max suspected something was up, she was fairly relentless. The Californian had accepted half-ass excuses all week for her strange behaviour, but knew that El wasn't telling her everything.

El was struggling to wrap her own head around her feelings before she could even try to voice them to her friend. The long distance runner vowed that she would come clean on their usual Friday evening sleep over.

...

Hopper pulled up in front of the high school right on time after school in his truck. The two girls were loitering by the front doors, waiting for the Police Chief.

"Hi Hop." El greeted happily, throwing her backpack into the back cab of the truck before squishing in beside him.

"Chief." Max greeted fondly, sliding in beside El. There was a not too often used middle seat in the front, but Max and El always squished together when Hopper came to get them.

“Mayfield.” Hopper acknowledged with a nod. He waited until they were buckled up before pulling out of the parking lot.

Friday sleepovers had been El and Max’s tradition for almost as long as they’d been friends. They rotated houses every weekend but El knew that Hop never minded the girls having a sleepover at the cabin as much as he grumbled about it. Hopper worked late hours on Friday and it was a relief for him that he wasn’t leaving El alone so much since she would be with Max either way.

“What’s the plan for tonight?” Hopper asked as they pulled onto the highway.

“Same old I guess?” El smiled at Max, who nodded.

Their Friday nights consisted of a mix of El’s beloved soap operas (which Max lovingly tolerated only for El), a horror movie thrown in here and there (Max’s favorite movies were *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*), but mostly the two girls just hung out and talked into the late hours of night.

“What about you Hop? What’s the plan?” Max asked.

“Some kids have been stealing Phil Larson’s garden gnomes again.” Hopper sighed a long-suffering sigh, “so you know I’ll get right on that.”

Max snorted at his sarcastic tone, before her face lit up excitedly.

“Oh right! I guess one thing is new Hop.” Max smirked at Hopper’s curious look. “I’m teaching El how to skateboard tomorrow morning. Could you give us a ride downtown when you head in?” Hopper’s eyebrows rose nearly into his hairline. He glanced sidelong at his adoptive daughter as they sped towards the cabin.

“Really?” Hopper chuckled, knowing how much Max had been desperately wanting to teach El to skateboard since they’d met. “What technique did you use to finally break her down?” He asked curiously.

“Blackmail.” Max grinned happily. El grumbled as Hopper chuckled once more.

“Nice one Mayfield. Consider your ride taken care of.” Hopper agreed, enjoying the playful way El stuck her tongue out at Max, who in turn jokingly flipped her off.

Hopper initially worried about El when he brought her to Hawkins. She’d been so quiet and withdrawn at first... The Chief of Police knew how unforgiving small towns could be to strangers, especially when you transferred in for high school. He’d worried El would be doomed to a friendless four years. As it was, his fretting had been for nothing because El made a good friend in Max Mayfield and for this he was grateful.

Since he was feeling so sappy right now he figured he might as well spoil them a little tonight.

“I’ll drop by with Benny’s for dinner.” Hopper said as he pulled off the highway to let Max and El out. Both girls brightened considerably.

“Thanks Hop.” El said happily.

“Thanks Chief,” Max said as she slid out of the truck, “and don’t worry, I’ll keep El in line tonight while you’re working.”

“You always do Mayfield.” Hopper nodded.

“Hey!” El protested, scowling at the both of them. The two girls giggled a moment later, unable to keep a straight face any longer. Hopper bid them goodbye before they closed the truck door.

The familiar sight of the cabin nestled against the trees always warmed El. She had come to think of this place as her home and it was always a relief to see it at the end of the day. She undid the three locks on the door and pushed it open before they stepped inside. The two girls momentarily revelled in the warmth of the cabin before kicking their shoes off and falling into their comfortable routine.

El and Max stored their bags in her bedroom and haphazardly hung their coats on the rack before heading to the living room. Max flopped down gracefully on the couch, groaning in relief as El settled herself in her usual chair.

“Finally the week is over.” Max’s voice was muffled as she spoke into the couch. “I thought chemistry was going to kill me.” El snorted and turned on the old television, setting it to the channel that her all time favorite show would be starting in any minute.

“You could always pair up with Lucas as a study buddy.” El teased, peering over at Max to see her reaction.

“Ha Ha.” Max stuck her tongue out at El childishly.

Actually, the more El thought about it the more she realized the thought was not without merit. There was a reason why the majority of their classmates considered Mike, Will, Lucas and Dustin nerds. El knew they were teased because they’d won the science fair year after year and they got very good grades. Though she hadn’t really known who they were before now... she was certain if Max asked for help, Lucas would be kind enough to tutor her.

“Maybe you should Max” El said seriously, prompting her friend to look up at her in disbelief.

“What?” Max sat up properly and looked at El as though she’d grown another head.

“Maybe you should ask Lucas to tutor you for chemistry.” El elaborated. Max scowled at her, searching her friend’s face with her sharp gaze.

“Is this a scheme of some sort?” Max demanded bluntly. El stared at her uncomprehendingly. “Because,” Max lowered her voice as though they’d be overheard, “you know...I have a crush on him or something?” She mumbled the last part, making El strain her ears to hear her.

“What? No. I’m being serious.” El assured her, holding her hands up as though to show Max she was unarmed.

“If you’re that worried about chemistry you should get help. And now that we kind of know them, it would be easier to ask. Lucas is in your class! So he’ll know exactly what you’re covering. If it makes you feel better you could always offer a trade. Tutoring in chemistry for

tutoring in arcade games.” El explained.

Max sighed and appeared to be seriously considering what El suggested.

“I guess I’ll think about it.” She finally agreed. That answer was as good as it was going to get and El knew to leave the subject alone for now.

“What about you El? Do you have a crush on Wheeler?” She was totally unprepared for Max’s question. Her mouth opened and closed much like a fish gasping for air.

Do I have a crush on Mike?

It was something she had been wondering all week and yet, to hear it out loud was another matter entirely. El froze, the words she’d been practicing all day in her head lodged in her throat.

No, El wanted to say. No I don’t have a crush on Mike. He’s nice and fun to be around but I definitely don’t have a crush on him. I also definitely did not accidentally call him pretty or wonder if he’d let me count his freckles—

“El?” Max’s brow was furrowed in concern and El realized she’d actually had yet to answer the question.

“Er... I don’t.” El’s voice came out strangled and high. Max simply raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“You don’t have a crush on Wheeler.” Max repeated slowly, her tone indicating that she didn’t believe El one bit.

“Yeah! I uh...” El wished her head would stop spinning. She’d had this all planned out so perfectly. Max would ask, she’d say no and they’d have a laugh together before tuning in to El’s soap and all of her feelings would *stop being so confusing*.

“I can’t! I hardly know him.”

Shit. That was *not* was she meant to say. The lame answer hung between them and El avoided Max’s scrutinizing stare.

“So you don’t have a crush on Wheeler... or you can’t have a crush on Wheeler because... you hardly know him?” Max repeated incredulously. El sank into the chair, miserable, but she nodded anyways.

“Why can’t you have a crush on Wheeler?” Max asked softly, her blue eyes serious. “Is it...” Max leaned on the arm of the couch, glancing around conspiratorially. El leaned closer. Max’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“Is it because he’s a nerd?” A mix between a laugh and a scoff caught in El’s throat and she nearly began to choke.

“Max!” El swatted at her friend, who giggled and flopped back down onto the couch and out of her reach.

“He’s not a nerd.” She insisted. Max propped herself up on her elbow and gave El a flat look.

“Okay. So he’s a little bit of a nerd but it’s really cute.” El’s eyes widened at the triumphant grin spreading across Max’s lips.

“Aha! So you admit it! You think Wheeler is cute!” Max exclaimed. El groaned miserably, trying to sink into the chair so far that maybe if she were lucky it would swallow her whole.

“Maaaax.” El whined.

“Now.” Max stood suddenly, gripping the front of El’s chair and forcing El to look at her. “Seriously, why can’t you like Wheeler? Isn’t the point of a crush wanting to get to know someone?” Max needled her. She squirmed under the pointed question.

Why can’t I have a crush on Mike? What am I afraid of?

“I...” El trailed off, trying to find her voice as she sorted out her thoughts. Max waited patiently, though she still had a firm hold on the arms of the chair to dissuade El from trying to escape.

Why couldn’t she have a crush on Mike?

Her stomach lurched at the thought of being rejected—of ruining

their new friendship because she went ahead and had some silly romantic feelings. She and Max would potentially lose Dustin, Will, Lucas and Mike as new friends because El made Mike feel weird if he didn't feel the same way?

It was a terrifying feeling for someone who had never had a good friend before Max. Much like the thought of losing Max frightened El, relinquishing their new friends because she ruined it by having a crush on Mike seemed stupid. Besides... her main goal in first coming to know the four boys was to make friends. But El still didn't really know Mike. She didn't want to date someone she barely knew.

"I want to be his friend first." El finally admitted.

There. That was what she wanted to say and the truth rang in her words. Lightheadedness seeped into her and El slumped in relief—finally she had sorted through her own confusing jumble of feelings.

She jolted as Max patted her fondly atop of her head.

"Then it's simple. Be his friend first." Max smiled kindly, standing up. "Now let's watch those horrible soaps you love so much." She grabbed the snacks from her bag in El's bedroom before coming back into the living room.

As El's favorite soap opera started, she sat there in a stupefied silence. Max made it sound so easy.

But was it that easy?

El glanced over to Max, who was watching the soap with rapt attention for someone who complained about them so often.

For El and Max's friendship to start, it had been as easy as Max sitting down beside her and striking up a conversation. And for their new friendship with Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas it had only taken El getting injured and then nearly run over in order to make a connection there.

So what if she had a crush on Mike? El was having fun making some new friends... and Max was right. Maybe the point of having a crush on someone was wanting to get to know them more. Maybe once

they became friends her crush would fade because they weren't meant to be that way. But El could be Mike's friend first and whatever came from her feelings would happen regardless.

It was as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. El sat there, half watching the soap opera with Max. Yes, her feelings were still new and odd and confusingly wonderful, but she shouldn't worry about them so much. Because first and foremost... El really wanted to be Mike's friend.

"El," Max whined, "you're missing all the major plot points."

"Don't worry, I've seen this one already." El grinned, snatching the bag of snacks from her friend.

"What! Then why are we watching this?" Max gasped, outraged. El giggled and promptly received a throw pillow to the face, which only made her laugh harder. She grabbed another pillow and stood poised over Max, her stance way too wide and only vaguely threatening as the Californian scrambled back, desperately looking for more ammo.

She was done enough dwelling over whether or not she had a crush on Mike Wheeler because she *definitely* did. Right now she needed to focus on kicking her best friend's ass in a pillow fight.

And that's what she did; right until Hopper interrupted them when he came into the cabin, hot burgers from Benny's in his arms.

The two giggling girls turned their throw pillow ire on the Chief of Police.

Hopper never stood a chance.

...

"Just like this?" El asked nervously, holding her arms out like a bird trying to take flight as she looked to Max to give pointers.

"Yikes... I mean...kind of. Except you know you have to actually stand on the skateboard El?" Max sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose in an expression that was entirely Hopper.

The two girls were currently loitering outside of the Hawkins Police Station, Max trying to coax El onto her spare skateboard with mixed results. Hopper already disappeared into the station, leaving them to their skateboard lessons.

“Okay.” El took a deep breath, eyeing the skateboard distrustfully. She’d managed to avoid this for almost a year and a half, but El made a deal and she intended to keep it even if the thought of getting on this horrible thing with wheels terrified her. She just preferred to have her feet firmly on the ground. But Max had brought her old elbow and kneepads for El and admittedly they did make her feel a little better.

“Okay.” Max repeated, waiting impatiently for El to do something.

A long moment passed and El just continued to stare at the skateboard.

“El!” Max snapped, “for the love of—just get on the board it’s not going to bite.” El shot Max a dirty look before she tentatively reached one foot out and placed it on the surface of the skateboard.

“Now remember, get your balance first. If your head moves so does your body. Place your feet bolt to bolt so your weight is evenly distributed. You’ll know soon enough which foot is more comfortable to keep in front.” Max instructed, the impatience bleeding away from her voice as El finally got on the board.

“Okay, now we’re going to start practicing how to push.”

El’s head whipped towards Max, throwing her completely off balance. She would have toppled off the board had Max not caught her.

“What did I say about your head moving?” Max gave El a wry smile.

“Thanks.” El said sheepishly.

“Let’s try again.” Max suggested, gently helping to steady El once more.

Max was a very tolerant teacher. She was careful and endlessly patient once El finally got on the board. Even as El took several spills

to the pavement when she'd lose her footing, it didn't really hurt because the pads took the brunt of the force. As soon as she was feeling slightly more confident, Max suggested they head down to the arcade because it was already ten by the time El kind of got the hang of it.

"You mean... skateboard all that way?" El glanced at Max fearfully.

"It's only a couple of blocks," Max grinned, "and you've got the hang of it now. I believe in you."

"That makes one of us." El grumbled.

Max laughed and dropped her board to the pavement, climbing on as though it was natural as breathing. The two girls made their way slowly to the arcade. El's movements were shaky and clumsy as she followed after Max, but at least it was progress.

Somehow skateboarding hadn't been nearly as bad as she thought it would be. In fact, El could see why Max enjoyed it so much. The wind nipped at her cheeks and the thrill of going faster and faster was almost as exhilarating as running.

El zoned out to the feeling of skateboarding and barely heard Max caution, "El! Slow down!" But it was too late.

The arcade came into sight and El had pushed herself too fast to stop comfortably. Just as she was about to hit the curb of the sidewalk El dove off the skateboard awkwardly. She stumbled and fell, skidding to a stop on the sidewalk.

"Holy shit! El! Are you okay?" Max kicked up her board and came running towards her. Much to both of their surprise, El burst out laughing.

"I knew it. You cracked your head on the pavement, didn't you?" Max groaned, helping El up carefully. The Californian checked her over for any injuries much like a worried mother bear.

"No!" El tried to contain her laughter, watching as Max's face grew gradually more annoyed. "Sorry, I don't know why I'm laughing. Near death experiences will do that to you I guess."

“You’re hilarious.” Max scowled.

“Wow El, you really know how to make an entrance.” Dustin announced himself. El and Max spun around to see Dustin standing not too far off on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets as he observed the two of them.

“I try.” El flushed. Dustin laughed and they fell into step with him, heading towards the entrance of the arcade.

“Why are you late?” Max asked curiously.

“I won’t go into details but let’s just say a well placed hairball was in my sneaker.” Dustin explained. El and Max made identical noises of disgust.

The three of them filed through the front door of the arcade. The familiar sights, smells and sounds of the Palace Arcade greeted them.

It was pretty dead, with only one or two other people El didn’t recognize from the usual Saturday morning crowd. More than once it had just been her and Max here until 11AM.

The two girls decided to follow Dustin, who seemed to know where his friends would be located. They rounded the corner of the middle aisle and sure enough, Will, Mike and Lucas were clustered around Dragon’s Lair.

Will and Mike were cheering on Lucas, who had his game face firmly in place as he dodged and ducked and lunged—his movements precise and calculated. He was totally in the zone and therefore completely unsuspecting of Max as she crept up behind them with a devious glance at Dustin and El. El’s lips twitched and Dustin gave Max an equally devious thumbs-up. She crept behind the three boys, who were far too captivated with the game to notice her approach.

As Lucas came to a particularly tricky part involving rolling colored boulders, Max stood behind the three of them with her hands on her hips and said, “don’t forget to jump!” in a loud voice.

Three things happened at once.

First, Lucas screamed at a pitch much higher than anyone anticipated, jumping like a startled cat. Secondly, Will flinched in surprise while Mike nearly toppled over sideways. And Thirdly, Dirk the Daring came to a rather unfortunate end as his unattended character was squished to death by one of the boulders.

“Shit! Don’t do that!” Lucas complained, his ears tinged red as he desperately tried to calm his erratic heartbeat. The laughter from Max was not helping his irritation.

“Holy shit! You should have seen your faces!” Dustin joined Max in laughter, as El tried to suppress the giggles that bubbled out.

Though surprised to see them, Mike seemed to perk up a little when he saw El (though that might have just been her wishful thinking). Nerves slammed into her stomach with a brutality that she had yet to experience when their eyes met.

This was the first time El had really seen Mike since she accidentally told him he was pretty. And it was the first time she’d seen him since coming to terms with the fact that she definitely had a crush on him. Though it was easy to feel a determined resolve last night, El was currently having trouble thinking over the deafening beat of her heart.

“Hello.” El greeted nervously, not trusting the sound of her own voice at the moment. Her words prompted a round of greetings between the six of them.

Lucas finally remembered he’d been playing a game before they’d scared the crap out of him and whipped back around. Dirk the Daring was staring back at him, arms crossed over his chest in an unimpressed manner, clearly in skeletal form.

“Dammit. I was so sure I had it that time.” He groaned in disappointment, glaring at Max accusingly. Max looked as innocent as she possibly could, avoiding his glare.

“How did the skateboard lessons go?” Will asked, motioning to the knee and elbow pads that El wore.

“It only took me a half hour to get her to step on the skateboard, but

after that it went well.” Max interjected before El could answer.

“I guess it was fun. I had a good teacher, even if she’s kind of a jerk sometimes.” El stuck her tongue out at Max who returned the gesture.

“You should have seen her stick the landing.” Dustin exclaimed, “she wiped out like a pro.”

“Are you okay?” Mike looked El over worriedly. Her heartbeat quickened traitorously but she forced herself to ignore it.

“I’m fine. The pads took all the damage. I don’t think I got a scrape this time.” El proudly held out her limbs and did a small turn as if to confirm that she was in fact all in one piece.

“That’s good.” Mike returned her smile and El wondered if a person could actually melt into a puddle. She might actually be the first one to test this hypothesis with how wobbly her legs were beneath her.

“Anyways,” Max cleared her throat, drawing El’s starry-eyed gaze away from Mike with a pointed look. “Let’s play some games.”

The rest of the morning passed by in a blur of fun. El found herself flitting between Max and Lucas on Dragon’s Lair first, then to Dustin on Centipede, moving on to Mike who played Galaga, and currently she was watching Will play Pac-Man.

Though she was shy at first to observe the boys play, El quickly realized that they were very comfortable with an audience (judging by the way all four of them managed to crowd around a game at times, which was impressive considering how tall they all were), they didn’t seem to mind her watching their game at all.

“Turn left!” El gasped. Will frantically tried to escape the incoming ghosts, his fingers moving nimbly over the controls. She and Will both let out a breath as he narrowly avoided running into the ghosts, just barely squeaking around the corner. But it wasn’t over yet. El watched wide-eyed as Will maneuvered Pac-Man carefully away from the mob of ghosts out to get him, racing against them as he went for the last remaining pellets on the screen.

“Come on, come on, come on!” Will muttered, but his hand slipped on the joystick and his eyes widened in horror.

“Will! No!” El gulped, but it was too late. The ghosts descended on Pac-Man and it was game over.

Will groaned as his meager score flashed up, nowhere near the high score. Meanwhile El tried to calm her erratically beating heart—this was the main reason why she sucked at most of the arcade games when she played. She got way too into them and often panicked at the wrong moment, that’s why she was a good observer.

“Better luck next time.” El offered a sympathetic smile as Will pulled away from the game.

“Thanks El.” He smiled grimly. “Would you like to play?” He stepped back from the game courteously.

“No thanks.” She shook her head. “I’m awful. The only game I’m good at here is the claw crane.” El explained, tucking her hands in the pockets of her overalls as they began to head back towards where their friends.

“That’s right. You won that pink teddy bear for Mike.” Will agreed, before slyly adding, “he keeps it on his nightstand.”

El’s eyes widened and she was unable to keep the pinkness out of her cheeks as she gaped at him.

“Really?” She asked, wondering if Will was pulling her leg. He stopped walking for a moment and glanced around to make sure no one was within earshot.

“Really.” Will nodded seriously. “His sister Holly wanted it but he wouldn’t give it to her since you won it for him.”

El nodded dazedly, thinking about the morning she’d won Mike the giant pink teddy bear. When she’d momentarily thought he didn’t want it and offered to take it back Mike had quickly assured her otherwise. El smiled at the thought of Mike having to defend his prize from his sister. Maybe she’d have to win Holly something so it was fair?

El hadn't even known Mike had a sister! She really didn't know much about his family and there was really only one way to learn.

"Mike has a sister?" El couldn't help the question that tumbled from her lips.

"Two actually." Will confirmed. "Nancy's away at college and Holly is six. She just started kindergarten this year." Two sisters! Wow.

"I wish I had a sister. Or a brother." El admitted, her tone tinged with jealousy.

"What about you, Will? Do you have more than one sibling? Other than the one I stole clothes from?" El asked curiously.

"No, it's just me and Jonathan. But he's the best brother I could ever ask for. He always makes time for me, and gives me all his cool music. He's in photography at NYU." The pride in Will's voice was heartwarmingly sincere.

"He sounds great. I hope I get to meet him sometime." El smiled softly.

"He'll be back for Christmas. You could meet him then." Will beamed as they reached their friends. El made a mental note to ask Will more questions too. She wanted to get to know all of them, not just Mike.

"El! Thank goodness you're here. I'm starving." Max exclaimed, immediately latching on to her. "Let's go to Benny's."

It was just after eleven thirty and though El was hungry, she had to disappoint her friend.

"I'm sorry Max, I promised Hop I'd come straight back to the station after. It's cabin cleaning day and it's my turn to beat the rugs out." El said apologetically. Max groaned in disappointment.

"I'd be up for a burger," Lucas piped up after a moment's pause, "what about you guys?" He looked hopefully to his friends, who all made similar apologies.

"Sorry Lucas, I have to go help mom take Mews to the vet. You know

it takes at least two people to wrestle him into the carrier.”

“I’m out too. I promised my dad I’d help clean out the garage.”

“I have to go to the store for my mom.”

Lucas watched in disbelief as each of his friends bowed out. Max and Lucas simultaneously wilted in disappointment, realizing that no one else was able to make it to Benny’s.

Struck with an idea, El realized there was no reason why Lucas and Max couldn’t go together! That way they could still get food and maybe Max would have a moment to ask him about tutoring.

“Why don’t the two of you just go together then?” El suggested breezily.

Max and Lucas eyed each other incredulously at her suggestion, as if they each expected the other to protest.

“Yeah, if you’re both hungry you might as well go and get something to eat.” Mike raised an eyebrow at the dubious expressions on their faces.

“Well...” Max fidgeted with the sleeves of her red sweater, hesitant to be the one to say yes first.

“I’m in.” Max did a double take. “If you are.” Lucas added hastily, not wanting to sound too forceful.

“Oh. Okay, sure. Let’s go.” Max agreed, trying to bolster her usual confidence but failing as it came out a little shy sounding.

With that settled, the group began heading out of the arcade.

Grey clouds roamed over the sky in the time they’d been inside, dimming the bright sunlight. Rain couldn’t be far off, but at least it hadn’t started yet. The six of them lingered by the bike racks as Mike, Dustin, Will and Lucas pulled their bikes out. Max dropped her skateboard and was poised to go at a moment’s notice.

“I’ll get these back to you later.” El pointed to the safety pads she still

wore, and the spare skateboard. "Thanks for the lesson."

"I'm glad you finally tried it. Now we can skate everywhere!" Max snorted at the horrified look on El's face. "Too easy."

"Mouth breather." El grumbled good-naturedly, giving Max a playful punch on the shoulder in retaliation.

Lucas and Max bid everyone goodbye before heading off in the direction of the diner. As El watched them go, she couldn't help but think how it looked right to see Max skateboarding beside Lucas on his bike.

"See you later El!" Dustin called, speeding away next. Mews had a vet appointment to get to after all! That left Will, Mike and El in the parking lot of the arcade.

"You're going to the police station?" Mike smoothly pulled his bike from the rack.

"Yeah, Hop is waiting for me."

Normally she didn't mind 'cabin cleaning day' as her and Hop had dubbed it, but right now she was enjoying the company of her (maybe?) friends and was loath to leave. But they also had places to be, so she couldn't keep them.

"Why don't we give you a ride over? Unless you'd like to skateboard?" Will offered, eyeing the board tucked under El's arm with a knowing look.

"I'll hold on to that for you. You can hop on with Mike." With the decision seemingly made for her, El went to hand Will her skateboard.

"Thanks Will." And that's when she caught sight of the impressive grin displayed on Will's face and her stomach dropped. Mike couldn't see Will and she was grateful as her palms began to sweat and her breath hitched in her throat.

It was the same, shit-eating grin Max wore when she knew something secretive.

Shit, shit, shit. Am I that obvious? Will knows I like Mike. He has to know. Does that mean Mike knows?

Immediately El's thoughts flashed to the events of this morning. When had she been so obvious? How did Will figure out she had a crush on Mike? She'd been careful to not outwardly treat Mike any differently than she already did, but it wasn't good enough?

What gave me away? El didn't notice the grin drop from Will's features as he watched her panic.

"El? You could always ride with Will if you are um... uncomfortable. Or we could walk you?" Mike's uncertain voice rebooted her brain.

"No, sorry! I just umm... thought I forgot something." Her too-high laugh sounded strained. El quickly turned from Will and settled herself behind Mike.

"Are you good?" He asked, glancing over his shoulder. El nodded wordlessly, not trusting her voice. The ride to the station was oddly strained and El knew it was because of her.

Is Will going to tell Mike? Will he be disgusted knowing that I like him? Has he already told Mike? El gnawed the inside of her cheek, her sweaty palms felt clammy wrapped around Mike's waist. Subconsciously, she tried to hold Mike a little looser, very aware that perhaps it was moments such as these that had given her away.

Never had El been so glad to see the station come into view a few minutes later. As soon as Mike brought the bike to a careful stop she scrambled off clumsily.

"Thanks guys. It was really fun today. Let's do it again sometime." She laughed oddly, earning concerned looks from both Will and Mike. She accepted the skateboard back from Will before turning abruptly and heading towards the station's front door.

El tried to ignore the panicked beating of her heart, or the nerves that festered under her skin. She was so concentrated on putting as much space between her and the two boys she didn't hear Will call to her at first.

"El, wait!" She hesitated mid reach for the handle of the door and slowly turned around to face Will. His mouth was drawn into a grimace, his brow furrowed in concern. Mike was still with their bikes a little ways off, out of earshot and trying to give them privacy as he waited by looking the other way.

"El, I'm sorry." Will glanced down at his feet awkwardly. "I figured it out." Upon seeing her alarmed expression grow, he hastily continued. "But don't worry—I would never tell anyone. I haven't told Dustin or Lucas or especially Mike. Your secret is safe with me." Will brought his hand up to his mouth, motioning like he was closing a zipper.

It was with this simple action that El's panic melted away. There was something so sincere about Will's demeanor; his genuine apology and pleading eyes were all too much. El sighed, taking a moment to wrap her head around the apology.

"Thanks Will. I shouldn't have freaked out." El said thickly, her tongue felt like lead in her mouth. "I only just figured it out last night, so it's a little new to me too." Will nodded, understanding shining in his blue eyes.

"I promise I won't tell." Will offered his pinky out to El, who took it seriously. They both smiled as they locked in their pinky swear, the strange air dissipating between them. Giddiness pooled in her chest, it felt weirdly good for someone else other than Max to know. El knew she could trust Will and it was a *great* feeling.

"We'll see you Monday?" Will asked hopefully.

"Definitely." El confirmed. She caught a glimpse of Mike looking over his shoulder sneakily, curious about what her and Will were talking about. El grinned and waved, startling Mike, who knew he'd been caught red-handed.

"See you Monday, Mike." El called cheerily. He waved back, clearly flustered at being caught.

El bid Will goodbye before heading into the station, feeling as though she were floating on a cloud. If ever there was an official sign of friendship, El thought it was the pinky swear. Will not only knew her

secret now, but also had promised to keep it.

If that didn't count as a sign of official friendship, what did?

...

The smile didn't leave El's face for the rest of the day, even as she beat the rugs outside of the cabin with an alarming amount of vigour.

"Stop smiling while you do that kid, it's weird." Hopper called from his position on the porch as he took a smoke break.

She only smiled harder after that.

5. I Do Believe (I Fell in Love)

Clouds rolled in over the course of Saturday, the rain beginning in the early morning hours. It was a light, sprinkling kind of rain that was annoyingly persistent, continuing even as Monday morning dawned.

Karen Wheeler bid Mike goodbye before peeling out of the Hawkins High parking lot. He pulled the hood of his raincoat up a little further, ducking under the overhang near the front door to avoid getting his backpack wet. His mom had insisted on driving him today, because she didn't want Mike to "catch his death" in the rain. So he'd left his bike at home and tried not to grumble at Holly as she'd merrily taken the front seat of the vehicle, making him get into the back as she smiled innocently. His mom and sister had sensed his bad mood this morning, but of course Holly insisted on poking the bear.

Mike lingered outside for the moment, the grey weather matching his mood. He didn't mean to be such a grouch this morning, but the restless sleeps on Saturday and Sunday evening had caught up to him. The miserable fall weather wasn't helping either.

For the remainder of Saturday afternoon and all through Sunday Mike had nearly driven himself crazy thinking about his interactions with El that morning at the arcade. Her mood had strangely flipped right before they got on his bike together and he could feel how uncomfortable she was. Her hands felt strangely rigid against his waist and as she'd bid him and Will a hasty goodbye he could tell something was wrong.

Did I do something? He must have been weird. Maybe he'd freaked her out by offering to take her to the station? The thought left a horrible heavy feeling in his stomach.

El had all but made a run for the station as soon as they'd arrived, but Mike was taken by surprise when Will mumbled something about needing a moment and raced off his bike to catch up to her.

Mike tried hard—he really did—but his curiosity got the best of him.

He couldn't help but peek over, his gut twisting with worry when he saw how El's face looked stricken.

Did Will say something to her? The thought was fleeting and silly. Will was the most conscious out of all four of them about people's feelings.

He snuck one more look just as a smile lit up El's face and *oh...* Mike watched as Will offered his pinky and El took it in a serious faced promise. A knot grew in his stomach as he watched, forgetting that he was supposed to be sneaking glances.

"See you Monday, Mike!" El caught him on the hop when she called out to him. She smiled and waved cheerfully before turning to go into the station. Flustered, Mike tried to look as though he hadn't been spying when Will came back to his discarded bike.

"What was that about?" Mike asked, trying to sound as casual as possible. There was a small, almost secretive smile on Will's lips that tightened the knot in Mike's stomach.

"Not much," Will shrugged. "I accidentally freaked her out earlier and now we're good." The manner of which Will said it, Mike knew that he wasn't going to get any more out of his friend. *Especially* because there had clearly been a pinky swear enacted.

The two boys had parted ways soon after that, Will completely unaware of how Mike was stewing over a wild array of thoughts that persisted the entire weekend.

By the wee hours of Sunday night Mike had come to only one possible conclusion: *El likes Will.*

He had tossed and turned, thinking about El and Will's strange interaction. It was the only possible answer that made sense. She must have gotten upset because it was Will's suggestion for El to hop on the bike with Mike instead of him! Clearly she had wanted to ride with Will instead. The realization only worsened the horrible gnawing sensation in his stomach and worse yet, Mike didn't understand why.

Mike sighed and yanked himself from his confusingly muddled thoughts, heading towards the front doors of the school.

A familiar looking truck pulled up just he reached for the door, the sight of the Hawkins Police Dept. emblazoned on the doors of the vehicle made him pause. He caught a glimpse of a familiar mop of red hair through the window and watched as Max booted the door open and slid out. The Californian waited patiently as she was drizzled on by rain for El to slide out too. Her curls were damp with water and a little frizzy looking as she slid out next, turning to bid a warm goodbye to Hopper before she shut the door.

Mike's stomach twisted painfully at the sight of El, he moved to open the door and slip inside before he was noticed. For some reason he didn't want to see her right now. Not until he figured out why he was in such a bad mood.

"Wheeler, wait up!" *Shit.* Max spotted him before he could make his getaway. The two girls loped happily under the overhang as Hopper pulled away.

Mike plastered a quick smile to his features as they came up beside him.

"Good morning." He greeted. The "good" part of good morning sounded hollow to his ears.

"Whoa, not a fan of Monday's Wheeler?" Max laughed. The three of them headed into the front doors of Hawkins High, El lingered back to walk beside Mike.

"Good morning Mike." El smiled at him, an action that both twisted and flipped the nerves in his stomach. His gaze met hers and all Mike could hear were his own thoughts.

El likes Will. Does Will like El back? Why does it matter?

Her brow began to furrow and Mike realized he had yet to answer. El opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by the one voice they all equally hated.

"Shit Red, I didn't want to believe it was true." Troy sneered; his

arms crossed over his chest. He and James were leaning up against some lockers just inside of the school doors.

Had they been waiting for him? Anger bubbled under Mike's skin. He turned to the two bullies, hands clenched and posture stiff. It took him a second to realize that they were actually addressing Max. They hadn't even spared a glance at him yet.

"I heard you started hanging out with the likes of Frog face." Troy sneered.

There it was, thought Mike bitterly.

"Are you hanging around those other freaks too?" Troy continued, he and James moving to bar their way. Mike expected that Max would laugh it off, that she'd deny having hung out with a bunch of nerds.

"Screw off stalker. Don't call them that. Who I hang out with is none of your business." Max snapped, anger practically fizzling off of her as she glared at Troy.

Mike reeled; completely taken off guard that Max would defend their small group. For years it had just been Mike, Will, Lucas and Dustin to watch each other's back—he was not used to having anyone else other than his friends defend themselves to others. A strange warmth bubbled up in Mike's chest at the thought of potentially having two more people to really count on, but he realized now was not the time for such warm and fuzzy feelings.

"Max." El stepped up quietly, grabbing her friend's hand gently to try and calm her down.

"Maaaax." James mimicked in a falsely high voice. "Shit Troy. No wonder you can't get a date with Red. She already has a dyke for a girlfriend." James and Troy laughed an ugly, loud laugh.

El's face darkened, but she held her ground. Their confrontation was starting to draw a crowd and Max clearly looked ready to explode.

"Move." El said simply, trying to push around the two bullies with Max in tow. Before Mike could do anything, he watched in horror as Troy employed the same dirty trick as he had to him—on El. Troy's

foot jutted out, catching El as she went to push around him. She crashed to the ground—hard—nearly pulling Max down with her.

Two things happened at once—“Max! No!” El yelled, quickly tackling the lower half of an enraged Max so she wouldn’t attack Troy and Mike found himself throwing the first punch of his life, blind rage moved his feet and upper body of its own accord. His fist connected with a solid *smack!* on the side of Troy’s jaw, completely unexpected by all parties involved.

Troy clenched his jaw and turned to Mike, his eyes simmering with anger. Without another word, Mike’s world was suddenly filled with pain. An unexpected punch to the gut from James nearly caused him to vomit; he doubled over in discomfort, unprotected from the fist that came flying into his eye as he was hunched over.

“Stop it!” El shouted desperately, still trying to hold Max back from attacking Troy and James. Pain exploded in his head as Troy landed another blow and Mike stumbled to the ground, dazed.

“WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?” A voice boomed. The crowd that had gathered quickly dispersed, students going on their way as if they hadn’t been eagerly watching a fight break out.

“You’re *dead* Frog face.” Troy hissed, before he and James took off, laughing as they blend into the crowd of students.

Mike lay there for a long moment; his head ached and he retched, still winded from the punch to his gut.

I’m so stupid. Why did he punch Troy Wilkins? All Mike remembered was seeing El hit the floor, and suddenly his own body hadn’t felt in control. All he could think of was punching the smug look off of Troy’s face. El was going to think he was some meathead that punched now and asked questions later, but also not... because he’d had his ass immediately handed to him. He wasn’t sure what was worse.

“Mike, are you okay?” El asked concernedly, but Mike couldn’t even look at her. Humiliation and shame scorched his cheeks but he managed a wordless nod.

She must think I'm worthless. The thought was an ugly one, whispered by the part of him that never understood why Troy Wilkins chose him or his friends to pick on.

An absolutely livid Principal Jefferson finally burst through the crowd; her eyes dark with anger as she scanned the group and took in the whole sorry sight.

“Get up!” Principal Jefferson snapped, her lips pressed into a tight line as she regarded the three of them. “My office. Now.”

El offered a hand to Mike, but he brushed her off. He didn't see the look of hurt cross her face, but instead followed behind her and Max as Principal Jefferson marched them towards her office.

A trip first thing to the principal's office was definitely not the way Mike thought his Monday would go.

...

Principal Jefferson ripped Mike apart word by word for a half hour before she finally seemed to run out of things to say. He was fairly certain he'd escaped easy, but it was still a strange experience for him: Mike “the dweeb” Wheeler to be sitting in the principal's office in deep shit for fighting in the halls.

Luckily, Principal Jefferson wanted to talk to them individually and Mike used this to his advantage to take every bit of the blame. He tried to leave the part about El holding on to Max to keep her from attacking Troy out, but other than that he firmly took responsibility for the incident. If he hadn't thrown a punch then maybe it wouldn't have actually come to blows. As much as Mike *hated* Troy, he had momentarily let his temper grip him and he was ashamed.

“Detention for the rest of the week Mr. Wheeler.” Principal Jefferson said coolly, “we do not tolerate physical violence as a method of dealing with your classmates here at Hawkins High. Now go get some ice for your eye and get to class.” It was an abrupt dismissal and he stood, seeing himself out of the office quietly.

Mike didn't bother trying to lament the unfairness of it all. He didn't

bother bringing up the times Troy and James had been caught either beating him, Dustin, Will or Lucas up. They seemed to get away scot-free each time. It was a battle that was never going to be won when your bullies were two of the school's star football players. It didn't take too many beatings to learn that it was better to keep your mouth shut.

"Mike." El whispered from the bench outside of Principal Jefferson's office where her and a fuming Max sat, "are you okay?" She absently touched under her own eye, mirroring where Mike knew there to be a huge shiner forming around his own.

He sighed. As embarrassed as he was, he couldn't blow El off again, especially with how she was looking at him with her enchantingly warm brown eyes so full of worry.

"Yeah." Mike sat down next to the two girls for a moment. Even Max looked over at him in concern. "I'm sorry I'm such a dweeb." He sighed, not noticing how both girls looked at each other in confusion.

"I should have been able to do more." Mike said bitterly, his hands curling into fists unconsciously. Frustration gnawed through him.

Why couldn't I have done more?

"Mike." His mouth fell open a little as El gently grasp his hand in hers. He looked up at her in confusion.

"You were more than enough. You got hurt trying to help us." He gasped a little when El gently ran her cool fingers over his now swollen knuckles, her brow furrowed in concentration as she studied him. His heart jumped into his throat when El looked at him that way, so much warmth in her eyes. It was as though she just saw *him*.

"Thank you."

Mike nearly melted when El gave his hand a soft squeeze before she let him go. Immediately he missed the feel of her hand in his, but he didn't have long to dwell on it.

"Yeah thanks Wheeler," Max cleared her throat with a strange smile at El. "You guys saved my ass back there." She sighed, continuing

when she saw Mike's bewildered look.

"El was holding me back because I'm one toe out of line from being tossed off the track team. I guess you can only get in so many fist fights before they threaten to kick you off." Her tone was bitter as she peered down at her sneakers. "If you hadn't punched Troy I probably would have."

"How long has Troy been bothering you like that?" Mike found the question leaving his mouth before he'd really thought about it, but Max didn't seem to mind.

"A couple of months now. He's a disgusting piece of shit. I keep shooting him down but I guess he just doesn't like no for an answer." Max scowled darkly.

His stomach twisted uncomfortably at the thought of Troy harassing Max.

"If you ever need help, we're here for you." Mike offered sincerely, really understanding Max in this moment. She, like Mike and his friends was powerless to stop Troy. Though his treatment of Max was different, it was even more disgusting than the physical and verbal bullying Troy inflicted on him, Lucas, Will and Dustin.

Max blinked in shock, but a slow smile curled at the edges of her lips as she processed the true meaning of what Mike had just said.

"Thanks Wheeler, I might take you up on that."

A throat cleared and the three friends looked up, startled to see Principal Jefferson standing there, hands on her hips.

"I believe I told you to go get some ice for that eye and then get to class Mr. Wheeler." Principal Jefferson stated, eyeing him in a much less irritated manner than she had when he was in her office.

"Yes Principal Jefferson. Sorry." Mike jumped up, ignoring the throbbing in his head at the sudden movement.

"I'll speak to you both in my office now, Ms. Hopper, Ms. Mayfield. Mr. Wheeler has already told me it was his fault, but I'd like to hear

your account of this incident.” El and Max stared at Mike, jaws agape.

Suddenly feeling bashful, he gave an awkward wave and said “see you later” before making his getaway.

Mike headed towards the nurses’ office for some ice, his face aching. He would have a shiner and his knuckles would bruise a little but somehow his injuries didn’t bother him in the slightest. It was a great feeling to know that they could count on two new friends to help have their backs.

...

“Wow Mike,” Dustin whistled when he saw him at lunch. “I gotta say you really pull off the smoky-eye look.” He patted Mike’s arm sympathetically.

The two of them were sitting at the AV Club table, Mike glad for the reprieve that the clubroom gave him. All morning his classmates stared at him, pointing or whispering about his shiner, and the smaller (but no less painful) bruise along his jaw. His head still ached, but Mike was in a pretty good mood for someone who’d been beaten up. Even Dustin’s poking fun couldn’t sour his mood.

“What happened?” Dustin asked. Mike quickly filled him in, knowing he’d have to do this at least once more when Lucas and Will arrived. Just as Mike finished explaining there was their coded knock at the door.

“About time!” Dustin jumped up opened the door, his words died in his throat when he realized it was not Lucas or Will, but instead Max and El.

“About time to you too.” Max drawled, her arms crossed over her chest.

“What are you doing here?” Dustin stepped aside anyways to let the two girls file into the AV Club room. El and Max settled into their seats they’d been in when they had visited before. El smiled at Mike as she sat down, his stomach flipped at the simple action.

“Lucas invited us.” Max got comfortable pretty quick, leaning her chair against the shelf. “He said whenever the weather is bad we should come have lunch with you nerds.” Max’s explained.

“We’re not nerds!” Dustin bristled.

“We’re kind of nerds Dustin.” Mike sighed; trying his best not to be hyperaware of how close El’s leg was to his. Dustin and Max began to squabble playfully.

El unexpectedly leaned closer to Mike, her eyes intent. He gulped, trying not to let his gaze linger on her soft looking lips.

“El?” His voice came out at a weirdly high pitch.

“Does it hurt much?” She asked, her brow furrowing as she studied his injuries a little closer. His face grew increasingly hot the longer she stared at him. One of her wayward curls was close enough that it was tickling his cheek and he hoped El couldn’t hear the too-loud beating of his heart.

“It’s not too bad. The ice really helped.” He smiled weakly, holding up the near melted bag of ice the nurse had grudgingly given him. Another deliberately timed knock at the door drew both pairs from their conversations. Dustin got up, opening the door to reveal Lucas and Will.

“About time!” Dustin repeated, causing Max to snort.

“Oh, hey Max! Hi El.” Lucas looked strangely excited to see the two girls. He sat beside Max, dropping his bag onto the floor between them. Will followed Lucas into the room and suddenly Mike remembered why he had been in such a bad mood for the majority of the weekend.

“Hi Will.” El greeted happily. Will returned the greeting just as cheerily, and Mike could feel the knot in his stomach return full force.

Right. El likes Will. And Will likes El I think. So why do I feel like this?

The uncomfortably heavy feeling in his stomach was worse than the

ache from his injuries. He moved away from El slightly, trying to clear his head. That wasn't going to happen if he was so close to her.

"Whoa! Mike, so it's true. Are you okay?" Will exclaimed when he noticed the bruises on Mike's face.

"Yeah. I'm okay." Mike nodded shortly, not really wanting to say much right now until he could figure out what this feeling was. He knew he was being weird.

Why was he being short with Will? If anything Mike should be happy for Will that he found someone he liked and better yet, have that person like him back! Luckily, Will didn't seem to notice at all as Max drew him into her greatly exaggerated regaling of the fight.

Lunch time passed with little incident and a lot of banter, soon the warning bell was ringing and Mike got up to begin gathering his things. He knew he'd been strangely quiet, because he could practically feel El's unease.

"See you later Mike." El said quietly, as she and Max finished gathering their things. The two girls departed first. Mike stood to follow after Dustin and Lucas who were leaving the room next.

"Go on ahead guys," Will called to Lucas and Dustin, who looked back curiously. "I have to ask Mike about a homework question I forgot."

"Okay, see you later." Lucas agreed. He and Dustin left without a second thought.

"What homework question Will? Can't this wait until after class?" Mike asked irritably.

The quiet *snap* of the door closing caught his attention. He glanced over at Will in surprise and immediately noticed his friend's scowl.

"What is wrong with you Mike?" Will ground out crossly. It was strange to hear such an irritated tone coming from Will. Mike was taken aback, unsure where this was coming from and yet knowing exactly why his friend had rounded on him.

“What do you mean?” Mike didn’t meet Will’s hard gaze.

“You were sitting there sulking all lunch time! You practically ignored El and I. What’s wrong?” Will’s foot tapped impatiently against the linoleum.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Mike snapped crossly. Why was Will giving him such a hard time?

“You were fine Saturday morning but after we dropped El off you got weird.” Will said bluntly.

Dammit. Sometimes Will was too damn perceptive for his own good. Mike really didn’t want to do this right now.

“We’re going to be late for class.” He muttered, trying to move by Will.

“Mike.” Will’s tone was serious and hard. “Party rules. Friends don’t lie.” He could feel Will’s blue eyes scorching a hole into the back of his head.

At those words, Mike deflated. He knew he was being a jerk and Will deserved answers, even if he didn’t really understand it himself.

Invoking party rules was a serious move; it was something that they’d had ever since the beginning of middle school in order to keep their Party in check. But besides that, Mike knew he was in the wrong and here Will was, giving him a chance to explain himself.

His shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Okay. You’re right.” Mike sighed.

The tension seemed to slowly leave Will’s posture as Mike let his backpack slide to the ground. He plopped back down into an empty chair at the table, resigned. Will followed suit, eyeing him warily as if he would make a run for it.

“I know that El likes you.” Mike blurted. When Will’s eyes widened and he didn’t say a word, Mike kept going. “And I know that you like El back and I think that’s great! But I’m acting like a totally dweeb

because I don't know... it doesn't feel great? This is hard to explain." He was trying to make Will understand what was going on, but his words seemed childish and unclear.

"Wait a second. You think El likes me?" Will regarded him with an astonished look, as if he still couldn't quite believe what he was hearing.

The bell for class rung but both boys ignored it, accepting that this was far more important to get cleared up.

"Well..." Mike swallowed thickly, "I mean yeah? She seems pretty happy whenever you show up and you guys had that moment on Saturday morning." He frowned as a slow, but surefire grin began to stretch across his friend's lips.

"Mike." Will's blue eyes shone with amusement. "I don't like El like that." There was a long moment of silence as Mike tried to jumpstart his sputtering brain.

Wait... what? He opened his mouth once and then snapped it shut.

"I thought you umm... liked both?" He finally managed to say, his brow creased in confusion.

Will chuckled, nodding. "Yes, both girls and boys are nice. I mean I don't have a crush on El, Mike. I like her as a *friend* only."

Will's assurance sent a surge of elation through him. Will didn't like El? Did that mean El didn't like Will?

As the elation surged through Mike it was quickly dampened by the realization that he had been a huge jerk. Will was his best friend, just as Lucas and Dustin were and he'd been a major dweeb. For what reason? Because he thought two of his friends liked each other? And to El! Had he really ignored them both at lunch? He'd been so consumed by the strange, sullen feeling in his stomach that he'd let it affect his treatment of his friends.

Will waited patiently for Mike to wrap his head around all of this. It didn't take too long.

“Wow.” Mike groaned, “I’m sorry. I’ve been a major dweeb.”

“Yeah, kind of.” Will agreed, making Mike groan again.

“I swear I was going to support you if you wanted to date El,” Mike started to ramble, “but I don’t know why I just felt so...” He grimaced, unable to think of the word.

“Jealous.” Will said matter-of-factly. Mike’s jaw dropped. He was on an emotional roller coaster that he hadn’t signed up for.

“Jealous? I don’t think I was...” Will pinned him with an unimpressed stare, but then sighed and laid a comforting hand on Mike’s shoulder, giving him a brief pat as though he didn’t believe a word he just said.

Jealous? Was that why his stomach felt as though someone had filled it with rocks every time he thought about Will and El?

But why would I be jealous?

“I’m just glad we figured out why you were being a dweeb. But we should get going. Mr. Mundy is already going to kill us for being late.” Will prompted, grabbing his bag.

Mike moved on autopilot, following Will to class and standing behind him as his friend gave a lame excuse about why they were late. Mr. Mundy just waved them to their seats with a stern look. His movements were robotic as he sat down at his desk and pulled out his notebook and pencil.

I was jealous. Disbelief faded away to acceptance and more confusion. Mike didn’t even try focusing on class today, his thoughts too consumed by the question of *why? Why was I jealous?* And yet, Mike tried not to focus too much on the other growing emotion that confused him even more.

Relief. Will didn’t like El. And judging by Will’s reaction, he began to doubt that El liked Will as anything more than a friend.

But why was he so relieved?

It was a question that would lead to more sleepless nights.

...

The next week and a half passed in a blur of homework and tests. As the weather grew more miserable, so too it seemed did the desire for the teachers to pass this misery onto their students by burying them in homework.

Mike served his detentions without any problem; using the time to catch up on the classwork he'd unwittingly neglected the past few weeks and the homework dumped upon him.

On that fateful Monday that Troy punched him, Mike sought El out after school to apologize for being weird at lunch. She'd forgiven him right away, maintaining that a punch to the head on a Monday morning could put anyone in a weird mood.

Troy's warning of "you're dead Frogface" seemed like a distant memory. Although Mike could feel Troy's poisonous gaze on him in the halls, he'd had yet to catch him alone to retaliate. Maybe even Troy was too bogged down with homework to fully make good on his promise.

It seemed like something had shifted in their relationship—for all of them.

Max and El had lunch almost every day in the AV Club room with the four of them as though they'd always been there. Max complained about the inclement weather, but she didn't seem too bothered by sitting with them at lunch.

Dustin took their presence in stride. Will was never really a question, but after Dustin's less than warm welcome to El, Mike wasn't sure how he would react. Sometimes his friend could dig his heels in about the strangest things, such as the impending muffin/cupcake discussion (of which Dustin still insisted on a having a formal debate before putting to a vote).

Lucas was strangely dazed half the time Max was around, but otherwise seemed happy that the two girls were becoming a fixture in their routine. All his nervousness about introducing two new party members had been for nothing because El and Max had smoothly

integrated into the Party.

Max was fun and seemed genuinely interested in their AV Club activities, which was flattering. Although her sarcasm was biting at times, Mike knew she really cared about them because of how she'd defended their group from Troy. She added fuel to the fire when it came to banter and Mike had to admit she was really cool.

Lucas seemed to agree with that notion too because he spent lunch times with a dreamy expression on his face whenever he looked at Max.

If Max was fire, El was certainly water. Whereas Max added an excited, impulsive element to the group, El was much like Will. She was calming when some of their banter got a little too hot headed. Her words were gentle, but her humour was dry and Mike found himself really enjoying her company. Will and El got along famously and Will seemed almost relieved that he had another even-headed person in the party to help him out with their yahoo friends.

Mike couldn't deny that more often than not he found his gaze drifting to El. How often had his eyes traced the straight bridge of her cute nose, down to her soft pink lips? His heart beat so hard against his chest whenever their eyes met for more than a split second. And her laugh... it could be mesmerizingly low and husky or a bubble of giggles depending on what made her laugh and each one did strange things to his stomach. It was a sound that Mike didn't think he would ever tire of hearing.

Something in the group had shifted... but something was shifting in him too.

...

It was lunchtime on Friday when Mike noticed that El was acting a little strange.

They were working on fixing a projector; it was needed for the period right after lunch so it was a bit of a rush job. Luckily it was a fairly easy gig, but Lucas, Dustin, Will and even Max were consumed with it. El was sitting in her usual spot at the AV Club table sandwiched

between him and Max.

Normally he would be busy with the project too, but as Mike noticed how much El fidgeted with the hem of her sweater and pushed her food around instead of eating it, he became increasingly concerned.

“El,” he called gently, not wanting to startle her. Mike frowned when she didn’t respond, staring down at her food. It was clear she hadn’t heard him, but Max had. The red head turned and took one look at her friend and shook her head at Mike.

“It’s no use Wheeler,” Max sighed. “El’s got her pre-race jitters. She’s fine, just a space case.”

“Hey!” El protested, realizing belatedly that Max was talking about her.

“You have a race? Today?” Mike asked in disbelief. How had he not known? The rest of the conversation crawled to a stop as Mike, Dustin, Will and Lucas all turned to stare at her.

“Er... It’s not today.” El cleared her throat timidly, “it’s tomorrow.”

“So no arcade tomorrow?” Dustin exclaimed. Immediately Max glared at him.

“I’m going to watch El. I always do when it’s a home race.” Max proudly tilted her jaw up at Dustin, who looked suitably scolded.

“I thought track season didn’t officially start until spring?” Lucas asked confusedly.

“It doesn’t.” Max nodded. “El is on the cross-country team too. The seasons don’t overlap so she joined both.” The four boys looked to El in astonishment.

“You must really love to run.” Will remarked, his blue eyes wide. El grew flustered under their gazes, but managed to nod.

“I do.” She agreed sincerely.

“Can anyone come watch?” Mike blurted. This time it was his turn to

be on the receiving end of everyone's gazes. El's eyes widened and her jaw dropped a little as she turned to him in shock.

"Um... Yes. Anyone can come watch. The race starts at nine at the nature trail out towards the quarry." El explained, "it's not very interesting for spectators because most of the time I'm on the nature trail. So you'd just be standing there at the start and finish line waiting for me." She fidgeted with the hem of her sweater shyly.

"I'll be there!" His mouth moved on its own accord.

"Really?" El's face lit up, her eyes still wide as though she couldn't believe it. He nodded vigorously. He would promise anything to her just to see her face light up like that again.

"Really." Mike confirmed. He was glad El could not see the look on Dustin's face, and even gladder that his friend didn't say anything at that moment that might hurt El's feelings.

That settled, the conversation surrounding the project resumed. Mike had a suspicion that Dustin was not happy at the idea of missing the arcade, but he too was drawn into the conversation and soon the strange moment was forgotten.

El looked much happier the rest of the lunch hour and actually managed to eat some of her food instead of just push it around on her plate.

Mike had to turn his attention to the project, but his thoughts kept drifting to the girl sitting beside him.

...

Dustin made it until after school, where he, Mike, Will and Lucas were grabbing their bikes from the rack before he burst.

"Saturdays are for the arcade Mike. You're going to skip out?" Dustin complained loudly.

"I thought I could go watch El race." Mike defended, wondering why Dustin was being weird about this.

“Just because you have a crush on El doesn't mean we should change our schedule.” Dustin mumbled resentfully.

“I don't have a crush on El! She's just a friend. And friends support each other.” Mike narrowed his eyes, irritation simmered under his skin. Why was everyone telling him he had a crush on El? And why the hell was Dustin being a jerk about this?

“Guys, stop it.” Will sighed tiredly. Mike and Dustin looked away from each other in a huff.

“We should all go. Who knows, it could be fun.” Lucas offered after a tense moment. “And besides, we could always go to the arcade after the race Dustin.” This seemed to placate their friend and his tense posture deflated, his features morphed into that of embarrassment.

“You're right.” Dustin sighed. “Sorry. I saw how excited El got. It would be bull shit not to go.” Though still annoyed with Dustin for digging his heels in, Mike couldn't help but agree with him. El seemed to be so excited that just Mike had wanted to come. Imagine when she saw all of them at her race?

A slow, horrible realization crept up on Mike: *they had no idea what to do at a sporting event*. None of the Party had ever attended any kind of race, game or match in their time at either Hawkins Middle School or Hawkins High, It couldn't be as simple as showing up and watching at the finish line, could it?

“Aren't we um... supposed to do something for an athlete?” Mike asked as his friends climbed onto their bikes. They turned to look at him in confusion.

“What do you mean?” Lucas frowned.

“Like... you know? You always see banners and stuff! And um... cheerleaders?” He was having a hard time recalling what had been at every single pep rally for an upcoming home game for any sport at school. All he remembered about those rallies was being bored out of his skull. Now he was regretting not paying attention.

A look of comprehension passed over Lucas's features.

"You're right. Banners and er..." Lucas looked to Will and Dustin for help. All four of them were now at a loss for words.

Shit. Mike panicked inwardly. They couldn't show up to support El without being properly equipped!

"So you're saying we should make a banner for El?" Will asked curiously. That seemed to be the one item that both Mike and Lucas could think of being at a sports event.

"I'm not cheerleading." Dustin said flatly. Mike waved him off, his mind racing. The more he thought about a banner, the more he liked the idea. At least they would not be showing up empty handed to El's race, and she might like it!

"Yes. We should make a banner, it's a classic support move right?" Mike nodded slowly. Will perked up at his confirmation.

"Right! I think that's a great idea, there's always at least one banner at all the pep rallies. We could make it just for El." Will was in. Mike felt grateful that his friends hadn't just laughed it off.

"We'll need supplies." Lucas commented, clearly his mind was running a mile a minute too. "I know Erica has some paint. I could run home and grab it."

"I have some paper at home." Will offered.

"I guess I could grab some tape so we could patch it together..." Dustin added.

"The garage is clear at my place. We could assemble it there." Mike suggested, looking to his friends for confirmation. Determination shone on Will, Lucas and Dustin's faces. The plan made, Mike climbed onto his bike.

"My place. Forty-five minutes." With that, the Party dispersed.

After several failed attempts and a near all-nighter, the banner was complete.

Karen had ordered the boys to bed around midnight, but once she

saw what they were working on she changed her mind. She left with a twinkle in her eye and a stern warning not to wake her, Holly or Mr. Wheeler.

Lucas would almost certainly be grounded after being forced to pilfer the paint from his little sister's room. Erica caught Lucas red-handed and he made a run for it as she yelled after him.

Bright eyed, bushy tailed and functioning only on roughly three hours of sleep, the four headed out the next morning to the nature trail by the quarry. There were at least twenty cars in the parking lot at the start of the trail. They parked their bikes at roughly ten minutes to nine, out of breath from the hard bike ride.

"Where's Max?" Lucas asked, glancing towards the unfamiliar crowd of people. The start and finish line was set up with a bright piece of green plastic tape and there was a small table set up marked 'registration'. Approximately thirty or so people were milling around sipping hot drinks and bundled up in blankets and sweaters, waiting for the race to start. It was cold and overcast that morning; the smell of rain lingered in the air.

Mike scanned the crowd, trying to quell the strange antsy feeling in his stomach. There! He spotted the familiar bright red head of hair and red sweater.

"This way." Mike nodded towards the direction he'd seen Max. She was leaning against some wooden posts near the starting line, a lazy grin stretched across her face when she noticed them.

"Morning stalkers!" She greeted cheerily, "cutting it a little close aren't we?" Max stood up straight as they gathered around her.

"Morning Max." Will greeted sleepily. Lucas just smiled that strange, dopey smile he often had around Max.

"At least we made it!" Dustin whined, "we were up almost all night."

"Where's El?" Mike asked at the same time, peering around Max as though she were hiding the distance runner behind her. Max looked curiously between Mike and Dustin.

“El is over there getting a pep talk from Coach Kline. You won’t be able to talk to her until after the race at this point.” Max jerked her thumb to her right. Sure enough, he could see El’s familiar mop of soft curls. She was facing in the opposite direction, talking to a tall, middle-aged man holding a clipboard and wearing a bright rain poncho.

“Why were you up so late?” Max turned to Dustin, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

“We made something for El.” Lucas explained, prompting Dustin to open his jacket. He carefully pulled out the folded up banner and began to unfold it. As it got bigger and bigger, each of them held parts of the banner, unfurling it together. In bright green letters it read: “Go El Hopper!” Underneath the lettering was a majestic looking tiger in mid roar (courtesy of Will’s artistic talents).

“You guys made a banner?” Max’s eyes were wide as she realized what it was. They nodded proudly. Max burst out laughing and all four boys deflated at the sound.

I knew it. This was a stupid idea. Mike inwardly berated himself.

Max finally noticed how stricken the four boys looked and her laughter stopped abruptly.

“Oh shit. You made a banner!” Her tone changed to a mix of excitement and the same kind of voice your great aunt uses before she pinches your adorable cheeks.

“Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do for athletes?” Lucas bristled, not quite able to keep the irritation out of his voice.

“Yes. Absolutely.” Max nodded, realizing she had put a real damper on their attempt in supporting El. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have laughed. I just really wasn’t expecting you guys to make a banner.” Max apologized sincerely.

Mike exchanged uneasy looks with Will, Dustin and Lucas as they held the banner. They’d been so sure this is what you did to show your support for an athlete, especially one who happened to be your

friend. Had they been wrong? Sure, this was their first time at a sporting event... but they'd all agreed that a banner was a classic way to support someone. El was going to think they were such *losers*.

"Seriously guys." Max could see how hard the four of them were currently overthinking their decision. "El will love it. She was already disgustingly happy that Wheeler was coming out to watch her. She'll probably get all mushy because you guys all came and you were nice enough to make her a banner."

Collectively they let out a sigh, feeling a little silly still that they'd made El a banner. Mike tried to ignore the swell in his chest that El had apparently just been "disgustingly happy" that he was coming to watch her race today.

"So what you're saying is that you're just jealous of El's amazing banner that we made for her and you want one too for your track meets?" Lucas teased.

"Maybe." Max flushed and looked away.

"Well we happen to know four guys with way too much time on their hands who could make that happen." Dustin chimed in with a goofy grin. Max glared at him.

"I can see it now," he continued, "Zoom Away Mad Max!" They all laughed as Max flipped Dustin off jokingly.

"Whatever," she said impatiently, "it had better be just as awesome and it better not be pink." Lucas and Dustin exchanged a devious glance; it was *definitely* going to be pink.

"Thank you for joining us today! We're going to go ahead and get today's Tiger Trail Cross-Country Race started right away. Runners, to the starting line please. We take off in one minute." Coach Kline spoke into his bullhorn, effectively ending their conversation for the moment.

There was a bit of jostling as volunteers, spectators and racers got moving. Only ten racers were running today, Mike didn't recognize any of them except for El.

The runners lined up at the starting line and Max excitedly bounced on the balls of her feet, craning her neck to see El. He briefly wished that they'd gotten here sooner. Then they could have actually said good luck to El before she had to start. As it was, her game face was on and she was clearly very focused on the race ahead of her.

Exactly one minute later, the starting gun went off and the runners disappeared onto the nature trail.

"So now we just wait?" Lucas looked to Max, who nodded.

"Yep. It's a ten-kilometer run so it'll take about an hour." Max explained.

"Ten-kilometers!" Dustin swore, his jaw dropping in shock. Lucas, Will and Mike made similar noises of surprise. Max snorted, resuming her lean against the wooden post.

"El can run that far?" Lucas whistled appreciatively.

She's incredible. Mike sighed mentally. Max, Will, Dustin and Lucas all turned to stare at him.

Shit. Mortification snaked down his spine. He'd definitely said that aloud hadn't he?

"I mean," Mike cleared his throat, trying to ignore the shit eating grins Will and Max were wearing. "She has to be in incredible shape to run ten-kilometers is what I meant." His voice cracked treacherously.

"Whatever you say Wheeler," Max smirked. It was clear she didn't believe him in the slightest, especially as his cheeks grew traitorously pink under her scrutiny.

"Shit, it's starting to rain." Dustin cursed. Sure enough, a few fat drops of water began to fall around them. "We have to save our masterpiece!"

Mike, who was more than relieved to have a temporary distraction, quickly helped Dustin fold the banner. It was starting to drizzle steadily and umbrellas appeared all around them like a colorful sea of mushrooms popping up from the mossy ground.

Lucas reached into his backpack, bringing out their own umbrellas. He'd had the foresight to gather all the umbrellas he could find at his place just in case it started to rain.

"I only have four, but you can share with me Max." Lucas offered shyly.

"Thanks stalker." Max grinned happily, cozying up a little to a startled, but happy looking Lucas.

The better part of an hour passed and they waited in the crowd of family members and volunteers. No one seemed to mind the drizzling rain as they waited for the runners to return.

The five friends passed the time by drawing Max into Dustin's notorious "cupcake versus muffin" debate, to which Dustin wanted to put to an official vote (but Max stated she would abstain from voting about something so dumb).

Just after an hour passed, there was an excited call of: "I see someone!" And the crowd turned excitedly to see who it was.

"Is it El?" Max asked, trying to see over the crowd. Mike's heart thumped in excitement, hoping that it was El. There was a moment as everyone tried to figure out who the runner was... it was a Hawkin's High Tiger coloured shirt—and it was her!

"It's her!" Max shouted, letting out a whoop of excitement. "Come on El!"

"Get the banner ready!" Dustin instructed. The five of them hurriedly shuffled awkwardly together, trying to keep the banner under their umbrellas as much as possible to protect it from the rain. They waited as El rounded the corner just before the finish line before Max said "now!"

Bright, bold green painted letters read: "Go El Hopper!" as they unfurled the banner dramatically.

El picked up speed as the finish line came into view, her face a mask of determination as she ran hard. There was a cheer that went up at her finish and Max broke away from them racing over to El and

tackling her in an affectionate hug.

The boys hung back as El's coach came over to talk to her, though Max had no qualms about hanging around for this. Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Will watched in nervous anticipation.

A few moments later El and Max turned and were heading back to their group. Mike's whole world seemed to slow down the moment El looked their way.

She was breathless and excited, her cheeks flushed from her hard run. Thick curls were plastered to her face and neck from the rain. As her eyes met his, Mike's heart stopped.

Pretty, stunning—beautiful! His thoughts thrummed with the beat of his heart as it restarted again. The excitement from her run, something El loved to do was written all over her face and it was captivating.

The moment she spotted the four of them holding the banner, El's face lit up in the most radiant way. Her eyes widened in awe, her jaw dropped open and she nearly tripped Max when she stopped abruptly.

"You... you made me a banner?" El breathed, her eyes sweeping between the four of them.

"We helped!" Will piped up. "But it was all Mike's idea."

"But I chose the color." Dustin puffed out proudly.

"That's because it's the school colors, dumbass." Lucas teased.

"You're just jealous at my sheer artistic eye for color palettes."

"What artistic eye are you talking about, you once—" And as Lucas and Dustin began to bicker back and forth, Mike was nearly mowed down by an ecstatic cross-country running track star.

El bowled into his side, wrapping her arms around him in a bear hug of epic proportions. Her wet curls tickled his chin, her head tucking perfectly under his. Mike returned her hug tentatively, relishing the

feel of her in his arms.

“It’s amazing! I’ve never had my own banner before. I love it.” El gushed as she continued to hug Mike, who was currently wondering if it was possible to die from your heart exploding in your chest.

“Thank you!” Her eyes were wide with wonder, her lips slightly parted as she looked up at him in a way that stole his breath. She was so endearing, so warm and kind and so *amazing*. She just ran ten kilometers and placed first in her race, but here she was—hugging a dweeb like him.

“You were amazing.” Mike managed to say. El’s cheeks flushed deeply and she gave him another fond squeeze before releasing him. He immediately missed the feel of El in his arms, but knew it would be weird to keep holding her.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” El chanted as she hugged Lucas, Dustin and Will in rapid succession. It’s clear how much this meant to her from the mixture of awe and joy shining on her face.

“What about me?” Max pouted, crossing her arms over her chest and glancing away in a pretend hurt manner. El laughed and threw her arms around Max, planting a huge, sloppy kiss to the side of her cheek.

“Ugh! El!” Max shrieked in disgust, wiping at her face desperately to get the saliva off. El giggled, dancing out of Max’s reach as she lunged for her.

Rain started to drip onto the banner and it was Will who noticed first as the four boys watched the two girls goof around.

“We have to fold the banner!” Will quickly started the job. They awkwardly folded the banner, trying to hold their umbrellas with the crook of their arm and also fold at the same time. Once it was done, Dustin moved to tuck the banner into his jacket but El stopped him.

“Can I keep it?” El asked shyly, her eyes shone with such hope that she could ask for his entire comic collection and Dustin probably would have forked it over.

"Of course El!" Will grabbed the banner from Dustin and handed it to El. "We made it for you after all." She beamed brightly, accepting the banner from Will carefully.

"It's wet and cold and I'm hungry," Dustin whined, "can we get going now?"

"You're always hungry." Lucas shot back, but his stomach chose that moment to let out a loud grumble. Max laughed.

"I guess we didn't eat breakfast this morning." Lucas admitted sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Why not?" El asked curiously, peering at the four of them.

"They stayed up all night making your banner and got here with just a few minutes to spare. I'm guessing you didn't have time for breakfast?" Max smirked. El looked down at the banner tucked in her arms in further awe.

"All night?" She repeated in amazement.

"I'm still cooooooold." Dustin moaned again, prompting Lucas to nudge him with his elbow.

"We could go for waffles!" El blurted, surprising the group with her outburst.

"Shit El, not ten minutes after a race and you already want waffles?" Max grinned, slinging her arm around El's shoulders dotingly.

"If you haven't eaten, we could go get breakfast from Benny's?" El flushed at Max's teasing.

"Is there something significant about waffles?" Mike asked bewilderedly.

"They're El's all time favourite food." Max explained, "we go for waffles after a race to celebrate."

"Max." El whined, glaring half-heartedly at her best friend.

“Let’s get going. I’m cold and wet and I need food.” Dustin pulled El from Max’s hold, walking her towards their bikes without another word.

Mike trailed behind the group as they followed Dustin and El. It was Will who noticed Mike dawdling behind them. Dustin, Lucas, Max and El continued talking happily among themselves as they walked, not noticing Mike’s slower pace just yet.

“You okay?” Will dropped his voice so the others wouldn’t hear. Mike stared ahead at El, watching her talk animatedly while hugging the banner carefully to her chest as though she would never let it go.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Mike’s said hoarsely. Will followed Mike’s gaze and realized who he was looking at. He kept quiet, letting Mike muddle through his thoughts without interruption.

When his friends had initially told him he had a crush on El Hopper, he thought they were crazy.

He ignored the weird nerves he got around El, the way his tongue seemed like it was twice its usual size when he tried to talk to her, the way he overanalyzed almost every interaction they had...but something had shifted in him the moment El looked at him after her race, her eyes alight with sheer joy from her run. There was something so *warm*, so earnest about her; Mike knew he was a goner, lost in her mesmerizing brown eyes.

As he and Will trailed after their friends, Mike realized he was seriously screwed. His friends were right.

I have a crush on El Hopper.

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BONUS SCENE (OMAKE?)

“Mike.” Will said exasperatedly, “I don't like El like that.” There was a long moment of silence as Mike tried to jumpstart his sputtering brain.

“Come here. You were a dick to both of us so you know what that means.” Will sighed. Luckily his friend seemed to have enough brain cells left to obey and Mike leaned forward as Will rummaged around in his backpack.

Will slapped two pieces of plain white bread to each of Mike's cheeks and held them there firmly.

“Now what are you?” Will demanded.

Mike sighed deeply.

“An idiot sandwich.”

6. You Don't Mess Around with Jim (El)

Monday at lunchtime was bright and crisp. The trees were shedding their vibrant autumn leaves, there were so many plastered to the track, it resembled the yellow brick road from the Wizard of Oz. After a week of on and off rain and lingering gray skies the early afternoon sunshine was glorious and warm.

El tilted her face up towards the sun, relishing the warmth on her cheeks. Max lounged next to her on the bench, staring up at the blue sky.

"What do you want to do for Halloween?" Max asked, breaking the comfortable silence.

"Halloween?" El repeated, blinking away the bright light of the sun and turning to look at her friend.

"It's only eleven days away." Max said matter-of-factly. "I know what I'm going as."

"You always know what you're going as." El snorted. Max grinned lazily, stretching her hand into the sky as though she was trying to grasp at the few wispy clouds.

"That's because Michael Myers is the best." She sighed dreamily.

Max was quite the horror movie buff. While the Californian tolerated El's love of soap operas, El bravely tolerated Max's love of horror. It was not a genre that she was very fond of, but she was fond of Max and that's what her best friend loved to watch. They'd watched *Halloween* so many times that El was fairly certain she could recite the dialogue word for word.

Last year the two girls had simply bought candy, crashed at Max's place and had a *Friday the 13th* marathon (part one through five). In August of this year part six had finally been released and they'd watched the whole series all over again before going to see it. For Max it had been the highlight of her summer.

"I wouldn't mind doing something like we did last year?" El offered, turning her face back to the sun, basking in the light. "We could invite Lucas, Dustin, Will and Mike." She added as an afterthought. Her heart jumped at the idea of spending Halloween with their new friends, especially Mike.

"Yeah! I like that idea. We could watch it at my place. Mom and Neil are going to visit Neil's sister that weekend, so my house will be empty." Max shifted excitedly beside her.

"We could ask after school, before you and Lucas disappear for your study date." El remarked slyly. Max huffed and flopped back over onto the bench, tucking her hands underneath her head as she peered up at the sky.

"I wish it were a date." Max sighed. El's eyes snapped open at her admission and she turned to the redhead with an eager smile already on her lips.

"Really?" El could scarcely believe it. Her best friend had liked Lucas for over six months at this point but hadn't done anything about it.

After their impromptu lunch at Benny's, Max had managed to ask Lucas to tutor her in chemistry. He had agreed, especially when Max offered to teach him some "real skills" at the arcade. They'd met a total of four times so far and El knew something had changed between the two of them.

Max nodded absentmindedly. There was a brief silence as El waited patiently for her friend to continue.

"I like him." The Californian admitted finally. It took all of El's willpower not to burst out in a dance of happiness.

"I really like him." Max's voice softened a little and El swooned at the tone. Normally Max didn't speak her feelings so openly. To hear her admit how she felt about Lucas made El's heart ache in a good way.

"So," El leaned overtop of Max's head, tickling her face with the tassels on her hoodie. "Why can't it be a date?"

"I think he's shy. And I don't want to ruin anything." Max swatted at

the hoodie tassels, her nose scrunched up in concentration.

El could appreciate that sentiment. They were pretty much in the same boat when it came to their crushes. It was daunting when trying to move forwards on your feelings could mean getting kicked three steps back if that person didn't feel the same. But the different between El and Max was clear: Max had guts of steel.

"You'll never know if you don't try. If you like him that much I think you just need to grab him and kiss him senseless—like in my soap operas you love so much!" El teased.

"I guess that could work." Max shrugged. "So I'll do that if you do." Her eyes flashed in mischievousness. El's jaw dropped.

"What!" She exclaimed, "I can't just go up to Mike and kiss..." She trailed off as she thought about it dreamily. The idea of just walking up to Mike, pulling his shit collar a little bit so she could pull his lips to hers was admittedly very appealing. But El's daydream twisted and she began to think of all the things that could go wrong—like Mike pushing her off and making disgusted face. Or Mike flat out rejecting her and ending their friendship because she ruined it.

"You know what, I think I like your method." Max continued, not noticing the increasingly downcast look growing on El's face. "I think I will do that. No bullshit that way."

A determined look crossed Max's features and El could tell her best friend had made up her mind.

Perhaps there was a method to her silly suggestion. At least there wouldn't be all this horrible uncertainty. It was driving El mad, all the flip flopping feelings.

One moment Mike did something, and she was sure—so sure! That he might like her back. The next, her self-doubt chewed away at any confidence and she was right back at square one. The thought of doing something so bold as to march right up and lay one on Mike made El's cheeks flush. Maybe the grab him and kiss him senseless method wasn't for her. But Max...

“As long as you invite me to your wedding, Mrs. Sinclair.” El quipped, earning a shocked look from her best friend.

“Don’t say that!” Max’s cheeks grew red and she looked around in a paranoid manner, making sure no one was around to hear. El grinned.

“Maxine Sinclair,” El sighed dramatically, “it sounds like destiny.” She pretended to swoon. Max let out a bark of laughter.

“It doesn’t sound like destiny you dweeb, it sounds like the name of some snobby lady who owns way too many tea cups and doilies.” They burst out into giggles when they made eye contact.

The rest of lunch hour was spent coming up with increasingly snobby hobbies for the fictional “Maxine Sinclair”, though the redness didn’t leave Max’s cheeks the entire time.

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The moment the last bell rang and El made it to her locker, Max was already waiting for her, clearly impatient and excited to go find the guys. Lately Max had been meeting Lucas by the bike rack to take off for their study sessions so they knew where to look right away. The two girls made it outside in record time and immediately headed for the bike racks.

El could see Dustin and Mike already standing there. Her heart flipped at the sight of Mike, his fluffy hair slightly askew and his mouth twisted into a wry smile as he chuckled at something Dustin said.

Dustin caught sight of the two girls first and waved.

Mike turned around and as soon as his eyes landed on El, he seemed to grow pale and the smile slid right off his face. Her heart lurched in confusion at his response. He didn’t seem very happy to see her? El didn’t have any time to dwell further on his reaction because Max called out to the boys.

“Hey dweebs!” Max greeted fondly, oblivious to Mike’s strange

reaction.

“Hey Mad Max, hey El!” Dustin greeted happily, offering his hand for a high five to the both of them. Max and Dustin high-fived hard—their hands smacked loudly.

“Yowch! Too hard.” He waved his smarting hand, his palm turning bright pink. Mike offered a half-hearted wave and an equally half-hearted “hello”. The Californian was far too excited and not to be deterred.

“Where are Will and Lucas?” She asked excitedly, craning her neck around Dustin as though he were hiding them in his coat.

“Right there.” Dustin pointed over her shoulder with a grin. Sure enough, Will and Lucas both emerged from the front doors of Hawkins High, talking animatedly.

El glanced at Mike worriedly. He seemed to be trying his best not to look at her. Discomfort twisted in her stomach.

Max all but mowed down Will and Lucas in her excitement once they were close enough to the group.

“Finally!” She exclaimed exasperatedly.

“Nice to see you too Mad Max.” Lucas smiled, amusement flashing in his dark eyes.

“Enough niceties,” Max waved them off impatiently. “What are you stalkers doing for Halloween?”

The question seemed to catch them on the hop. There was a quiet moment of discomfort between the four boys as they exchanged glances.

“Normally we go trick or treating.” Will said slowly, “but this year Lucas and Mike think we’re too old.”

“We’re not too old!” Dustin immediately blurted, levelling a glare at Mike and Lucas.

“We’re sixteen Dustin, don’t you think that’s a little old? Even Erica teased me for going last year.” Lucas grumbled. It sounds like this was clearly not the first time the argument had cropped up.

“But where will we wear our costumes then?” Will asked, his tone laced with disappointment. He turned his large, sad blue eyes to Lucas and Mike, who groaned simultaneously and muttered something about “not the puppy dog eyes Will”. Before Mike could open his mouth to continue the argument, Max jumped in.

“Wear your costumes to my house then!” Max offered excitedly, looking between the four confused expressions. “We’ll trick or treat around my block to score some candy, and then we can settle in and have a Friday the 13th marathon.” Max continued, growing increasingly excited despite the obviously horrified expression on Lucas’s face.

“Isn’t that a horror movie?” Lucas’s eyes were wide.

“The best! Isn’t that right El?” Max looked to El for support. She nodded seriously, trying not to smile at the near identical looks of dread on the boys’ faces. For all their sci-fi and fantasy, El quickly concluded that they weren’t horror movie lovers at all.

“You’ve never seen Friday the 13th? What about Halloween?” Max asked dubiously, as though this was the strangest thing she’d ever heard. The four boys mutely shook their heads: no. Max’s face lit up so brightly El wondered if her friend would soon take flight right from the ground in happiness.

“Oh my god, you’re horror movie virgins! Aren’t you?” Max blurted out excitedly.

“Oh my god! Say *virgins* a little louder why don’t you?” Dustin hissed, his eyes growing wide in horror when Max opened her mouth shamelessly to do just that.

El giggled when Lucas slapped a hand over Max’s mouth, effectively stopping her for a moment. This moment did not last long however because Max licked his hand in retaliation.

“Eww! Max!” Lucas wiped his hand on his jeans, disgust marring his features.

“Oh please, you told me you guys use a spit-shake sometimes. You’ll be fine.” Max rolled her eyes. “You will love the movies! I promise.” She smiled deviously, ignoring Lucas’s.

“I guess that way we’d get to go trick or treating.” Will said slowly, his eyes meeting Dustin’s excitedly.

“Yeah! Okay, I’m in. I get to wear my costume and eat candy. I’ll watch a horror movie for that.” Dustin agreed, grinning eagerly.

“Okay that’s two out of four in.” Max said seriously. “And you said you guys have a party by democracy so that means we just need one more vote.” Dustin, Will, Max and El turned to Mike and Lucas expectantly.

“No way! I’m not watching a horror movie, those things freak me out.” Lucas scowled, crossing his arms over his chest and planting his feet firmly as though his stance would help him not to be swayed.

Betrayal often comes from where you least expect it. Lucas firmly expected Mike, who had so far been steadfastly against the idea of trick or treating this year to back him up and was therefore, completely and utterly unprepared for what happened next.

“Okay. I’m in.” Mike held up his hands as though he was surrendering. Lucas’s jaw dropped and he turned to his friend in shock.

“What?” Lucas asked, completely dumbfounded. His question was mostly drowned out by the triumphant cheers coming from Will, Dustin and Max.

El grinned at Mike, happy that he’d voted for the movie marathon. He seemed back to normal and briefly she wondered if she’d just been imagining his avoidance of her at first. She was hoping to catch his eye, but Mike was too busy smiling at Dustin and Will’s reaction to notice her at first.

She loved his smile. It was cute and unguarded and El was far too

busy staring to notice Mike's gaze flit to hers. Their eyes met and his ears tinged pink. El's heart flipped in her chest deliciously, but was immediately flooded with confusion when Mike said:

"I need to get going."

Disappointment and confusion surged through El. She definitely hadn't imagined Mike's weird behaviour.

The abruptness of his words caught everyone off guard.

Mike climbed on to his bike amidst the confused questions from his friends.

"What? Why?" Dustin's sounded just as confused as El.

"I just forgot something my mom asked me to do." Mike's excuse wasn't fooling anyone, but clearly he didn't feel like telling them the real reason.

Is he avoiding me? El's mouth twisted downward into a grimace. Had Mike figured out she liked him? Was he disgusted? That would explain his weird reaction to her today and on Saturday after her race.

He'd been weird since she'd crossed the finish line and given him a big hug. When they'd gone to Benny's afterwards he'd been really quiet. Whenever El had tried to talk to him Mike seemed to shy away from her. It was disheartening to say the least, but El tried not to think anything of it at the time.

Maybe he was just trying to figure out a way to turn her down nicely because he wanted to stay friends. There were far too many "maybe's" swirling around in her head and it was terribly frustrating.

Everyone bid Mike goodbye, off put by the abruptness of his departure. El tried not to watch him go, keeping her eyes instead trained on Max's happy face.

"Well, I guess we should get going too." Lucas admitted, turning to Max. She nodded, dropping her trusty skateboard to the ground.

“Let’s go stalker.” She agreed with a smirk. Lucas rolled his eyes and grabbed his bike from the stand. They were off to the Public Library, where they’d had their previous four study sessions.

“Want a ride to the station?” Dustin offered, scooting forward on his bike and patting the seat behind him. El smiled gratefully. Despite the weirdness going on between her and Mike, she was so fortunate to have her friends.

“Thanks Dustin.” El said before throwing her leg over the back of the bike.

Dustin’s wild hair tickled her cheeks the entire rambunctious ride to the station and El couldn’t stop giggling. Especially when Dustin figured out why she was giggling and proceeded to move his head much more than necessary just to tickle her face. The cool air and bright sunshine felt amazing and she could feel her good mood slowly return.

Lucas and Max parted ways with them in front of the library, heading in to study chemistry as they called goodbye to Will, Dustin and El when they kept biking. The station came much faster than El would have liked. When they arrived, she dragged her feet a little as she got off Dustin’s bike.

“We were actually going to head to the arcade before we go home. Want to come?” Will asked hopefully.

“I’d love to. I just have to ask Hop.” El happily said, nodding exuberantly.

She loped into the station. The familiar sights, smells and sounds of the Hawkins Police Station greeted her: the shrill ringing of the phone, the smell of nicotine and forgotten burnt coffee, and the familiar forms of Callaghan and Powell at their desks.

“Hey mini-Hopper.” Callaghan greeted when he noticed El.

“Callaghan. Powell.” El nodded in a very Hopper-esque way, a grin splitting her stern face a moment later.

“Don’t do that, it’s creepy.” Callaghan whined. Powell rolled his eyes

and waved El on.

“Chief’s in his office. He’s on the phone but head on in.”

“Thanks Powell.” El made her way around their desks that were piled ridiculously high with paperwork and old cigarette butts and towards her adoptive father’s office. Sure enough, he was still on the phone as El quietly came around to the doorway.

Hopper gave a small wave as he continued talking into the phone.

“All right. I’ll give you a call back tomorrow, let me know how it goes.” Hopper’s brow was furrowed in a way that El was almost certain would become permanent eventually. He hung up the phone a moment later.

“Hey kid, good to go?” Hopper reached for his hat and jacket.

“Actually,” Hopper stopped halfway between standing and sitting, peering at her curiously. “Can I go to the arcade? Dustin and Will invited me. They’re waiting outside.” El fiddled with the sleeve of her jacket, her hopeful eyes trained on Hopper.

“Will you be able to finish your homework tonight?” Hopper asked, sliding back down into his seat.

“Yes. There’s not that much.” El nodded eagerly.

“Go ahead kid. I’ll pick you up at five thirty okay?” Hopper smiled slightly as he picked up one of the many stacks of paperwork on his desk.

“Thanks Hop! You’re the best.” El surprised both of them by giving Hopper a hug. She wasn’t normally one to initiate hugs with Hopper, but was grateful when he returned it, patting her back gruffly before she released him.

“I know.” He agreed happily, “see you soon kid.” El grinned and took off again, yelling out a goodbye to Callaghan and Powell before bursting out of the station to rejoin Will and Dustin.

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Several hours later, Will, Dustin and El walked out of the arcade with candy stuffed under their arms, courtesy of her teddy picker skills.

El handed Hopper a big bag of candy when she got into the truck at exactly five thirty, after bidding her friends goodbye.

“Is this a bribe?” Hopper asked, one of his eyebrows cocked as he accepted the bag of candy.

“No,” El smiled happily as she buckled up her seatbelt. “It’s because you’re the best.”

Hopper looked momentarily flustered. He cleared his throat as he shifted the truck into gear.

“And don’t you forget it kid.”

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Tuesday and Wednesday were strange days for Mike and El.

At lunchtime both days, rain hammered the ground prompting the two girls to retreat to the AV Club room for lunch. When they arrived, El was surprised to see Mike had sat in a different spot. Usually he was between Will and El, but today he was already sandwiched between Dustin and Lucas, working intently on a project.

Other than a cursory hello, Mike hardly looked her way all lunch hour. Trying not to be bothered by it, El busied herself with talking to the others during lunch on Tuesday and Wednesday.

By Thursday, Will had definitely noticed Mike’s strange avoidance of El.

Lunch hour on Thursday consisted of Will shooting Mike pointed looks and Mike trying to avoid both Will’s gaze and El’s. Mike’s head swivelled back and forth between them almost the entire lunch hour it was almost comical.

About halfway through lunch Dustin finally asked Mike “what the

hell is wrong with you?” Because his head had been moving so much. Mike had mumbled something about a “stiff neck”, but nothing more.

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By the time Friday rolled El was disheartened and frustrated. How was it that they had gone from good—no great — last Friday to awkward and dancing around each other in less than a week?

If Mike was going to reject her, El only hoped it would be soon so they could move past whatever the hell this was. Because even getting flat out rejected couldn't be worse than this.

El reached the end of her rope that Friday during American History, when she saw Mike. His form was uncharacteristically hunched down, as though he were trying to hide something. El frowned. Though things had been strange the last week, her concern for her friend overpowered the frustration and she found her feet moving of their own accord towards his desk.

“Hi Mike.” El greeted, stopping timidly a few feet away from his desk.

Evidently she startled him, because he jumped and looked up at her with wide eyes. Her jaw dropped. Mike's jaw was a gruesome blossoming array of bruises: dark blue, purple and yellow. El's eyes flitted from his split lip, to the impressive shiner marring his swollen eye. She stared in horror, a gasp slipped past her lips.

“Hi El.” Mike managed a weak smile.

“Mike, what happened?” She has to fight the urge to hug him—to touch his face, to pepper his jaw with feather light kisses. Instead, her hand hung awkwardly between them as she gaped in horror at his injuries. Before Mike could answer, Ms. Hotchkiss's voice interrupted them.

“Ms. Hopper. Please get to your seat. We are about to begin.” El wilted under Ms. Hotchkiss's stern gaze. With one last worried glance at Mike, El reluctantly headed to her seat at the back of the room.

El spent the entire period in a mixture of worry and scorching anger.

Worried about Mike—the injuries on his face looked nasty. Will he be okay? Is that all of his injuries? Her worry eats away at her all period, but worse is the anger stewing beneath her skin.

The anger stems from one person whom she was pretty sure was behind Mike's injuries—Troy Wilkins. Maybe he'd finally got Mike back for punching him the other week? She gnawed the inside of her mouth at the thought. It was so incredibly frustrating. El had not one, but five friends now who were tormented by the same person and it seemed that no one could do a thing about it. Troy Wilkins had to go down—but what could she do? She'd talked to Hopper and he could regretfully do nothing about Max—but could he do something for the boys?

As soon as the bell rang to signal lunch period, El pounced on Mike before he could slip away into the stream of students. She was done letting him avoid her. This was too important.

"Mike, let's go get you some ice." El suggested, falling into step beside him as they exited the classroom.

"It's okay El, I think I've still got some in my bag." There was that weak smile again. At least he was actually talking to her. It seemed that whatever happened distracted him enough from the fact that he had been avoiding her all week.

El's mouth twisted downwards and she peered at her shoes for a moment as they walked.

"Was it Troy?" Her question was met by silence. Even in the hustle and bustle of the hallways, boisterous with chatter from students, to El there is only Mike. He wouldn't meet her eyes as El looked at him searchingly.

"Yes." Mike admitted finally. El swallowed thickly, an ugly, cold anger simmered under her skin at the confirmation that Troy had done this to him. They reached her locker and the two of them stopped so that El could grab her lunch.

"He and James caught me and Lucas off guard last night. Lucas looks about as good as I do." Mike sighed, leaning against the lockers

beside El's. By now the lunch time rush had died down. Most students are in the cafeteria or wherever they hole up to eat lunch, leaving the two of them alone in the hallway.

"You need to tell the principal!" El blurted angrily, unable to hold it in any more.

"It didn't happen on school property." Mike shrugged as they continued walking towards the clubroom.

"If it didn't happen on school property then tell Hopper!" El couldn't stand how resigned Mike looked.

"El." Mike said calmly, stopping just outside of the AV Club room and turning to look at her seriously. It was the first time in a week they had really talked and that Mike was looking at her—but she *hated* that it was because of Troy.

"It's not the first time it's happened. And it won't be the last." Her heart ached painfully at his words—she wanted to hug and throttle him at the same time. She knew that Troy and James had targeted the four boys in the past... but to do nothing?

Mike seemed to read the expression on her face.

"If we say anything El it gets worse. It always does." The anger swirling in her chest deflated a little and El sighed deeply.

"I guess." She allowed, "but I don't have to like it. I'll get him back for you." El tried to smile, but it came out strained. Mike appreciated the effort anyways.

"Thanks El." He said sincerely, before turning to knock on the door. There was a strange; scrambling noise and suddenly the door was thrown open to reveal a very bizarre scene.

Dustin and Lucas sat on a very flushed looking Max's legs, pinning her onto the ground.

"El." Will breathed in relief when he opened the door, his face was also flushed. He yanked her inside the clubroom without another word. "Please talk some sense into Max." Will pleaded.

Still shocked, El assessed the whole sorry scene.

Mike was right—Lucas had fared no better. His cheek and nose were bruised; the reddish hue of his bruises a stark contrast to his smooth dark skin. His lip was split and El could see several bruises on his arms. His face was flushed, much like Dustin and Will's in the attempt to restrain Max from presumably running out that door to hunt Troy and James down.

"Max," El gently kneeled down next to her best friend, "you'll get yourself kicked off the track team."

"Worth it." Max glanced at Lucas, her face stormy. In that moment El understood her best friend more than she can say. Seeing someone you cared about with injuries was hard to stomach, especially knowing whom those injuries came from and being unable to do a thing about it.

El reached out and patted Max on the head fondly.

"You're right, it would probably feel pretty great." El agreed, allowing herself a moment to daydream about punching Troy's smug face before looking back to her friend. "But I need my best friend on the track team and also not expelled." Max nodded miserably into her arms, and El gave Dustin and Lucas a signal to let her up.

"Sorry." Max apologized, her face flushed in embarrassment as she stood up.

"Don't apologize," Lucas insisted sternly, "we'd react the same way if you got hurt too." His cheeks reddened and everyone knew it wasn't just from the struggle of holding Max back anymore. Max's cheeks similarly reddened, but a smile pulled at her lips and she affectionately shouldered Lucas.

"Thanks stalker." Max smiled sincerely; plopping down into what had been his chair. Lucas huffed and grabbed another seat, scowling at Max.

The tense moment is over, and soon everyone fell into their usual lunchtime routine. The only difference is that everyone is a little

quieter today, discontent as they stewed over Lucas and Mike's injuries and their cause: Troy Wilkins.

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When the final bell on Friday rang El slumped in relief. Between worrying about Mike and Lucas, and thinking about what to do about Troy Wilkins it has been a very exhausting day.

But... it's Friday! El perked up a little when she realized what that meant: it was sleepover night! She'd almost forgotten because of the day's events. She threw her class supplies into her backpack and rushed to her locker, happy to see that her friend was already there.

Max too looked exhausted and grumpy. El offered her best friend a gentle nudge and a smile, which was returned gratefully when Max realized whom it was.

"Ready to go Mad Max?" El asked, summoning a grin.

"Let's blow this popsicle stand." Max agreed, slamming her locker shut and slinging her bag over her shoulder.

"Wait up Red." The two girls froze at that despicable voice. Troy Wilkins leaned against the lockers not too far off, his lips pulled into a satisfied smirk as he regarded Max.

Oh no. No. No. No. El cursed inwardly. Of all the times why did he have to bother them now? Did he have a weekly quota to meet or something? All she could do was hope that her best friend didn't immediately do anything too rash.

"I have to say, you're a pretty girl Red, but if you keep hanging out with those losers no one will want to touch you. I'm sure I have plenty more to offer than those nerds." His tone left no room to misinterpret *exactly* what he meant by "plenty more to offer". And if that didn't help Max clue in, the lewd once over her gave her certainly did.

Hatred scorched El's stomach and she could see the same feelings mirrored in Max's livid features.

“Go to hell Troy.” Max bit out angrily.

El’s mind raced with both anger and panic. It took three of their friends to restrain Max at lunch time, and right now the Californian looked about two seconds from actually ripping Troy’s limbs clean off and El can’t let that happen. She reached for Max’s hand, pulling her furious friend away from Troy with a sharp tug.

“Aww, don’t be like that Hopper. We were just having a little fun.”

The next few seconds happened in slow motion for El. Troy reached down, his hand outstretched. Max, who was half turned away from Troy didn’t notice his hand until it was too late. Troy gave Max’s ass a firm squeeze, a lazy smirk stretched across his stupid face in satisfaction.

El snapped.

A strange guttural noise tore from her throat. *Thumb out* is all that flashed through her mind and suddenly she’s punching that stupid smirk right off of his face. It’s so unexpected that both Troy and Max don’t have time to react.

Once. *Twice*. There’s a strange sort of noise as her second punch connected with his nose. Blood spilled down his chin and Troy howled, staggering back against the lockers in shock amidst the busy hall of students.

El ignored their classmates crowding around in excitement of a fight; too focused on the piece of shit in front of her. Anger burned her skin, her blood pounded in her ears as she let him stumble against the lockers.

“You bitch!” Blood seeped between his fingers, running down the front of his shirt.

“Don’t *ever* touch Max again. Do you understand?” El demanded, her cold eyes never wavering from Troy’s face.

Instead of answering her, Troy lunged with a furious roar. El brought her knee up in a brutal fashion, right into his groin.

Hopper taught El basic self defence when he first adopted her. One of his rules was to “*Never fool around. Put them down.*” It was a rule El had long since kept in mind should she ever need it.

Troy let out a strangled wheezing noise; his hands flew to his groin as he slowly sank to the ground. El regarded him with a look that could level buildings in that moment.

“You won’t touch any of my friends again. And don’t even look at Max. Say you understand!” El kneeled down next to his fallen form, before thinking *what the hell?* She stood up and gave Troy a solid kick to his gut. He couldn’t even defend himself from her kick because his hands were clasped over his groin.

He moaned in pain.

“*Say it!*” El repeated furiously. Her heartbeat pounded deafeningly against her eardrums. She barely felt Max pulling on her arm as she delivered one final kick.

“I understand.” Troy choked out finally, flecks of blood spitting from his lips. His face was contorted in pain as El finally allowed Max to pull her away.

The crowd of students is fairly silent; though El can see a shocked looking James finally jump into action. He carefully avoided her poisonous gaze as he hauled Troy up and away from their now laughing peers. With the amount of adrenaline currently pumping through her body, it’s a wise move on James’ part because El is fairly certain she could wrestle a bear and *win*.

“El—are you okay?” Dustin finally managed to push his way through the crowd. His eyes are wide and his face pale. He frantically looked El over as Max led her friend into the girls’ washroom. Dustin followed without a second thought.

“El that was the stupidest thing you’ve ever done.” Max’s voice was tight with anger. She pulled El towards the sink. Max started the water, waiting for a moment to make sure it’s not too hot.

El turned her hands over to survey the damage, trying to focus and

make them stop trembling. The blood on her knuckles is not her own and it sends a very strange feeling through her. She's never punched anyone before—let alone broken someone's bone.

Max gently grasped El's hands and ran them under the water, washing the blood from her. Her knuckles look a little red, but otherwise undamaged.

"I wouldn't say that was the stupidest thing I've ever done." El started, but Max pinned her with a glare that very much reminded her of Hop. Her shoes are suddenly very interesting.

"He grabbed you. I'm sorry." El said thickly, the rage that fueled her punches was replaced only by disgust. Disgust at Troy's actions and disgust at the moment her fist connected with his face for the first time because she relished it. El Hopper wasn't a bully like Troy. But she'd just been so *angry*. Angry that Troy would dare to touch her friend in such a way—angry at herself that she couldn't stop it before he actually grabbed Max.

Max softened, her blue eyes swept over her best friend in concern.

"He what?" Dustin demanded angrily in the quiet of the bathroom. "Are you okay?" He asked after taking deep breath, turning to Max.

"I'm fine." Max nodded seriously. "El here made sure to that. Don't apologize for something that mouth-breather did El. You defended me. Thank you." The sincerity in Max's voice let El know she was off the hook.

Yes, what she'd done was incredibly stupid...but if it stopped Troy from harassing Max—El would do it again in a heartbeat.

"Do you have any water Dustin?" Max peered pointedly at his backpack. He fumbled with it, dropping the bag from his shoulder and rummaged around.

"Here," Dustin hastily hefted the water bottle into Max's waiting hand. She grabbed the water bottle and held it out to El.

"Thanks." El murmured gratefully. As soon as the cool water touched her lips some of the shakiness in her limbs abated. Nerves still

crawled under her skin, but the water helped.

Dustin rummaged around once more in his backpack before holding out a small; brown coloured container and a spoon to El. Max and El looked at Dustin in confusion.

“I was uh... saving this for later, but you look like you really need it.” Dustin adjusted his hat sheepishly. “It’s pudding.” He added helpfully.

El accepted the pudding from Dustin with a grateful smile.

“Thanks Dustin.” The shakiness subsided in her hands, which she was grateful for as she tore into the pudding. The sweet, smooth chocolatey taste was heavenly. El savoured the pudding for a quiet moment before realizing that they really need to get a move on.

“Hopper is waiting for us Max.” El said seriously.

What would Hopper think? Getting into fistfights? Dread seeped into her, but before she can lose herself too far into her worry Max gently squeezed her hand.

“We’d better go tell him what happened then.” Max assured her confidently.

“I’m coming too! I only caught the last bit El—but I’ll help you talk to the chief too.” Dustin said determinedly.

Warmth blossomed in her chest. Max and Dustin are clearly not going anywhere and it makes El feel warm.

“Thanks guys.”

The three friends leave the washroom quickly, doubling back towards Max and El’s locker for their forgotten bags. El glanced around the now empty hallways—she’d half been expecting to be ambushed by a livid Principal Jefferson for fighting. But there’s no one.

As they reach their lockers, the only thing indicating that there had been a scuffle were some suspicious looking red smears on the floor, but otherwise their bags were left where they’d been dropped.

Hopper waited impatiently for them outside, leaning against the hood of his truck, smoking a cigarette and looking generally annoyed. More of a surprise is the three other teenagers surrounding Hopper.

Mike, Will and Lucas awkwardly stood there with the Chief of Police, clearly waiting for Dustin, Max and El.

“Geez kid, did you get lost?” Hopper flicked his cigarette down and smothered it beneath his boot.

“There you are!” Lucas simultaneously cried out, annoyed with having been left waiting. Hopper shot him an irritated look.

“Let’s get a move on.” Hopper is clearly miffed, but El can’t bring herself to look at him.

Panic bubbled in her chest. It’s going to swallow her whole. She’d never done anything like this before. Hopper is the Chief of Police and she just punched someone. Would he send her away? Tell her he didn’t want her as his daughter anymore? Her chest felt as though it would burst open.

“What’s wrong kid?” Hopper asked worriedly, noticing that something is wrong.

Max clearly sensed how distressed El was and answered for her.

“Chief, don’t get mad. El beat the shit out of Troy Wilkins because he grabbed my ass.” Max stated bluntly.

The effects of Max’s words are immediate. A vein ticks in Hopper’s forehead just as the other boys let out a startled sound.

“What happened?”

“Are you okay?”

“Are you hurt?”

The questions start flooding in between Will, Lucas and Mike. It’s overwhelming and Hopper doesn’t tolerate it for long.

“One at a time.” Hopper snapped, his eyes trained on El and Max. The three boys fall silent, though reluctantly.

“Now what happened exactly?” Max quickly and concisely explained what happened. His nostrils flared when Max got to the part about what Troy had said followed by him groping her as El had tried to pull her away.

By the end of the story Hopper’s face was dark with anger.

“That’s it. We’re going down to the station. Enough of this.” Hopper’s tone leaves no room for argument. He’s practically vibrating in anger as he stomped around the side of the truck.

Dread and panic threaten to overwhelm El. Never has she dreaded getting into the truck more than she does at this moment. Is Hopper mad at her? It’s only the Max’s comforting hand on her shoulder that lends El the strength to get in.

Dustin started to unlatch the back of the truck.

“I was a witness!” Dustin quickly raised his hand when Hopper shot him a stern look.

“Fine.” Hopper grumbled, but opened the back cab of the truck anyways. When Lucas, Will and Mike are clearly also going to climb in he levelled them with a glare.

“You didn’t witness anything.” Hopper growled.

“No sir, but we’re uh...” Mike trailed off.

“Moral support! Chief. Sir.” Lucas jumped in quickly, glancing toward the two girls in the cab of the truck. Hopper looked at Max and El, his stern gaze softened.

“Get in.” Hopper finally allowed.

The three boys don’t need to be told twice. They scrambled into the back cab of the truck. The back cab is an awkward pile of limbs and stooped shoulders as the boys tried to fit as best as they could. Hopper slammed the door shut before getting in the truck himself.

El takes no notice of the kerfuffle in the back of the truck, too lost in her thoughts that are threatening to spiral out of control.

What if he doesn't want me anymore? It's a question she's been afraid of ever since Hopper adopted her. Hop had always been so good to her—even when she was angry all the time and acted out a lot... but would this be the final straw?

The ride to the station was tense; no one wanted to say anything in the silence of the vehicle.

El kept sneaking glances at Hopper, trying to decipher his stormy features. Was he going to use his 'disappointed parent voice'? She was so distracted by her thoughts that she didn't even notice they arrived at the station until he shut the truck off.

"Come on El." Max pulled El's arm gently and they slid out of the truck.

Hopper stormed into the station as Max and El doubled back to let the boys out of the cab.

"Are you okay?" Lucas asked, desperately looking Max over as soon as he clambered out of the truck. Max nodded.

"El clocked Troy really good for grabbing me. I'm pretty sure she broke his nose right before kneeing him in the groin." Max smiled at El, who attempted a weak smile in return.

Lucas, Will and Mike gasped, their eyes growing comically wide. Their heads swivelled as one to face El.

"You really did that?" Mike's jaw seemed like it might just permanently stay agape.

They're going to think I'm a freak, El thought to herself dejectedly. She did her best not to meet their astonished gazes, too focused on her miserable thoughts.

"You know El, when you said you'd get him back for me... I didn't think you meant quite so soon." Her head snapped up in surprise to meet Mike's gaze. There's a small, funny smile pulling at the corner

of his lip and a snort escaped her.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” He said sincerely, before gathering her in his arms tightly.

El was fairly certain she could hear the sound of her heart flying out of her chest and thwacking against the station wall as he hugged her. Her senses are suddenly flooded by *Mike*. The soft feel of his jacket against her cheek, the scent of soap and his warmth nearly overwhelmed her. It’s much like the giant hug El gave him last weekend and though it’s not too tight it was as though her breath has been stolen. Her cheeks are so hot El feared they’d burst into flames when Mike released her.

“I’m glad you’re okay too.” Will chimed happily, adding to their hug before Mike can completely unwrap his arms from around her.

El suddenly found herself sandwiched by five other people in her first group hug. Dustin, Lucas and Max quickly pile on in a ridiculous looking, very squishy hug.

“You’re officially a badass El. You made it look so easy too! You’re like a wizard or something.” Dustin grinned as they released each other.

“El’s more like a mage. That’s even better than a wizard.” Lucas suggested with an equally large grin.

Though El is still overwhelmed by the events of the afternoon, she is no longer afraid. In the afterglow of her first group hug, El is pretty sure she could take on anything with her friends by her side.

“We should head in now. Are you good?” Max asked, studying El carefully.

“Yes.” El nodded seriously. With her five friends behind her, El led the way into the station.

Immediately they are greeted by a loud, angry argument between Hopper and a short blonde woman.

“I want an apology.” The lady demanded, her cheeks mottled red in

fury as she stood toe to toe with Hopper. Her lips were pursed into a thin line, hands firmly on her hips. But it is the figure sitting in the chair behind her that caught El's eye.

It's Troy Wilkins.

He's sitting on the edge of the chair, holding a cold compress to his face and looking generally worse for wear. It seemed he'd gotten his nosebleed under control, but the area around the bridge of his nose is already discoloured.

As soon as Troy caught sight of El, his eyes widened.

"That's the freak!" The argument between Hopper and the woman who can only be Troy's mother stopped abruptly. Hopper looked enraged at the "freak" comment and pinned Troy with an icy glare.

Mrs. Wilkin's head whipped around, her eyes narrowed angrily when she followed where her son was pointing.

"You! Young lady—you assaulted my son!" Mrs. Wilkins accused, her nostrils flaring. El was sure that if she let Mrs. Wilkins get close enough, the woman might throttle her.

A boiling anger ignited in her gut and instead of shying away El refused to back down.

"I punched your son because he groped my friend. He's been harassing her all year." El might as well have slapped Mrs. Wilkins. Her mouth gaped like a fish gasping for air. She swallowed a deep breath before the dam burst.

"How *dare* you! My son would never behave in such a manner. *You're a liar.*" Mrs. Wilkins' voice rose in both ferocity and volume.

"What are you going to do about this Chief of Police?" She whirled around again to Hopper, who looked positively furious.

Callaghan and Powell wisely kept their mouths shut; their eyes flying back and forth between Hopper and Mrs. Wilkins from the safety of their desks.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do. We're going to talk about this in my office because I'll be filing sexual harassment charges against your son if you don't get both in there. I'll tell you what your options are from there on out." Hopper ground out, pointing to his open office door. Mrs. Wilkins eyes widened in disbelief.

"How dare you—"

"NOW." Hopper barked. Mrs. Wilkins glared at Hopper before grabbing her son by the scruff of his neck and storming into the office.

"Stay here." Hopper sternly instructed the six teenagers. "Order them a pizza or something Callaghan. It's getting late." He snapped before going into his office and slamming the door behind him.

Callaghan and Powell let out a breath.

"Good to see you mini-Hopper." Callaghan greeted half-heartedly.

"You too Callaghan. We'll be in the break room." El responded just as half-heartedly.

Lucas, Mike, Will and Dustin peered around the police station as El led them into the break room. Max had been here plenty of times before, but for the boys it is their first time inside of the station.

The break room is old and worn but the chairs are comfortable and there's some old magazines lying around that are years out of date. The group settled in to wait for the results from the Chief of Police.

They spend the better part of an hour and a half milling around. Max and the boys made small talk, but at this point El was exhausted and spent most of her time curled up on the chair, tuning out. She could feel the concerned gazes from her friends, but they seemed to sense she just needed to be left alone.

Even the cheesy, wonderful pizza couldn't shake the nerves out of El.

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It's nearly six o'clock when Hopper finally entered the break room with a tired sigh. The six teenagers looked up at him in anticipation when he entered, rubbing the bridge of his nose as though trying to stave off a headache.

"Mayfield. You won't have to worry about Wilkins bothering you anymore," Hopper began.

"You killed him?" Max asked hopefully. Hopper grunted disapprovingly, though El could see the amusement flash across his stern gaze.

"No. But he'll be doing one hundred hours of community service and writing you a personal and heartfelt apology for his actions of which he deeply regrets." Max stared in disbelief at Hopper.

"As soon as I started laying down the harassment charges he changed his tune. He admitted to harassing you since September and the incident from this afternoon. Because of that it will stay off his record for now. But I warned him that if I hear about any further harassment or if he harms one little hair on anyone's head I will book him." Hopper's gaze flitted briefly to Lucas and Mike. Clearly Hopper had put two and two together about their injuries.

Relief coursed through El, leaving her a little lightheaded.

Troy definitely wouldn't be bothering them anymore: Max, Dustin, Mike, Lucas or Will! It was a great feeling. El could see the mix of excitement and relief on everyone's faces.

"You're the best Hop." Max beamed, looking as though she wanted to hug Hopper, but resisted.

Hopper's gaze turned to El and she froze.

"I'll drop you back off at your bikes. Go wait out by the truck for me." Hopper instructed. When no one moved, he looked exasperatedly at the teens.

"El is not in trouble. I just need to talk to her in *private*." Reluctantly, Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will got up and slowly filed out of the break room, heading down the hall towards the front door.

Max moved to follow the boys, but paused at the doorway.

“Don’t be too hard on her Hop, I already gave her a good talking to.” Max implored, before slipping around the corner.

Hopper sat in the chair beside El, the wood creaked as he settled down. He didn’t say a word and they sat in silence for a long minute.

“So are we not gonna talk about it at all?” Finally Hopper broke the silence. He peered over at El, his face unreadable.

El took a deep breath.

“I don’t regret punching Troy in his stupid face.” Apparently this wasn’t what Hop expected her to say at all, because he chuckled warmly. If Hopper was chuckling then he couldn’t be too mad. Relief crashed over her.

“I know you don’t. I think if you hadn’t have beat the snot out of that kid nothing would change.” Hopper remarked, peering down at his hands clasped across his knees.

“I don’t like the idea of you getting into any more fist fights. But I can’t blame you for doing exactly what I would have done in this situation. You’re a good friend kid.” El looked hopefully at Hop and he ruffled her hair fondly.

“Thanks Hop.” El whispered. Hopper smiled his special smile, looking particularly proud in that moment, his chest puffed out.

“And if that boy so much as *looks* at Max in the wrong way, you let me know.” His voice is steely, but El can’t stop smiling because she knows it’s not directed at her.

“Deal.” El held her hand out for Hopper to take in a not-so-serious handshake. She feels almost normal. The adrenaline, anger and dread have all left her system and now El just feels *right*. Hopper wasn’t mad. For the time being it seemed Troy was well and truly dealt with.

She’d never been good at arcade games, but maybe this is what it felt like to vanquish a boss?

“It had better be just you listening in Mayfield, because if your butts aren’t in the truck in thirty seconds you get to walk.” Hopper called loudly, glaring towards the doorway of the break room. El frowned in confusion before there’s a startled sort of scurrying noise. They could hear several sets of feet scampering down the hallway and the opening and slamming of the station front door.

Max poked her head around the corner. “Just me Chief.” She grinned.

Hopper snorted in disbelief.

“Okay. Let’s get going.” Hopper herded the two girls out towards the front of the station, where there’s a not so subtle pair of legs hanging out of the back of the truck as the other three boys pull Dustin into the cab.

Hopper rolled his eyes at both girls, who giggled. El and Max climbed into the front cab of the truck and Hopper went to the back to shut the cab.

Max leaned towards the window that separated the front and the back with a lazy grin once they’d all settled in. Will, Dustin, Lucas and Mike attempted to calm their labored breathing and look as nonchalant as possible.

“You guys should consider trying out for the track team with how fast you ran right now. I think you’d make it.” Max teased.

“That was enough running for the year.” Dustin groaned tiredly.

The ride back to school is uneventful and soon El and Max hopped out of the front in order to release the gaggle of teenagers in the back of the truck. The boys’ bikes are still where they left them in the deserted school parking lot.

As Dustin, Will, Lucas and Mike piled out of the truck El smiled. She is so lucky to have her friends.

They came to the station to support her and Max. Before the boys, it was just the two of them looking out for each other. To know that they now have other friends who would do the same... it makes El feel light enough that a good breeze would just carry her away.

"I really wish we could have seen you deck Troy." Lucas sighed, clearly day dreaming.

El and Max lingered as the four boys pulled their bikes from the rack.

"Judging by how he looked at the station you really did a number on him. Remind me never to get on your bad side." Will grinned and nudged El gently. Embarrassed, El sheepishly smiled and rubbed the back of her neck.

"She's my hero." Max said in a high singsong voice, pretending to swoon. Giggling, El shoved a swooning Max off of her. It didn't work and Max almost flattened both of them when she swooned a little too hard—throwing them off balance. Lucas and Dustin helped steady the two girls with a grin.

The six teens are startled by the sudden honk of the truck horn. Hopper is clearly done lollygagging.

"That's our cue." Max sighed, before looking hopeful once more. "Arcade tomorrow?"

There's a round of agreement before everyone gets ready to leave. Mike and El lingered behind the others as they headed towards the truck.

"El I have to ask..." She peered over at Mike in concern. His face is somber and those enchantingly dark eyes regarded her seriously.

"Yes?" El asked, matching his quiet, serious tone and leaned in to hear him properly.

"Are we changing our name from Face Plant Friends to the Troy Punchers?" Mike asked. She stared at him in disbelief before a bubble of laughter escaped her. He grinned.

"I think if we come up with a cooler name than the Troy Punchers, I'm in." El shot back, enjoying the way Mike pretended to look hurt. It appears that whatever weirdness had transpired between the two of them has evaporated. Their interaction feels normal and El is back to ignoring how her stomach erupted in butterflies when Mike leaned even closer, so close she's briefly tempted to kiss the tip of his nose.

“The Troy Tag Team?” He whispered conspiratorially. El groaned loudly as Max opened the truck door.

“Definitely not. Keep trying Wheeler.” El grinned. “See you tomorrow?” She added hopefully. Mike nodded enthusiastically.

“See you tomorrow.” He agreed.

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It’s been an exciting and equally exhausting day. El and Max’s usual Friday night sleepover is a much quieter affair than it normally is.

Hopper returned home to the cabin at around 10:30PM and found both girls zonked out on the couch. He threw a few blankets over them and turned off the TV, happy to see that everything was normal and well even after such a stressful afternoon.

Notes for the Chapter:

Updated every Wednesday!

7. Spooky Movies

“Should we go up to the door?” Dustin glanced nervously over his shoulder at the yellow house that he, Will, Mike and Lucas were currently loitering in front of. Kids of all ages in colourful and scary costumes swarmed the street around them.

“Isn't that what normal people do?” Will tried not to laugh at his friends' nervous faces.

“But this is Mad Max's house.” Lucas whispered, his eyes shifting left and right as though he would summon Max just by saying her name.

It's been a long time that any of the boys have had to go up to a house and knock. For years it's just been the four of them and Mike almost never knocks at Dustin, Will or Lucas's houses. They're practically family they're over so much! But this is different. This is the first time any of them have been over to Max's house.

Mikes studied the unassuming two story yellow home. The house is dark save for a light in what he guessed to be either the living or dining room. The porch light was also off and the crowds of children avoided the house since the doorway was not lit, seeking candy elsewhere.

“Well...” He glanced down at his watch. “It's already 7:05. We're technically late. Let's just go knock on the door.” Trying to bolster as much confidence as he could, Mike led the way towards the house.

The four get about a half step before a dark figure leapt out of the bushes, growling and waving a knife like a mad person. All Mike sees is a white, faceless mask and he lets out a startled noise of surprise. Lucas shrieked, scrambling back so fast he fell over on the sidewalk while Dustin and Will jumped back.

“Holy shit!” Max gasped, stripping off the white mask. “You should have seen the look on your faces!” She doubled over, clutching her gut as she laughed.

Dustin, Will and Mike groaned, realizing they'd been had.

“And you,” Max looked to Lucas, who was sputtering on the ground, “who screams like that? You sound like a little girl.”

A giggle from behind startled the four boys once more. Lucas managed not to shriek as they turned around to see another figure standing behind them, holding a bloodied machete and wearing a hockey mask.

“Hi guys.” El greeted happily, slipping her mask off. She peered shyly at them, trying to stifle a smile by the looks of it and failing. Mike’s heart pounded against his ribcage. Whether it was from being scared or because El was here, he wasn’t sure.

“Who are you guys supposed to be?” Dustin complained, gesturing to the two girls. Max rolled her eyes.

“I’m Michael Myers. You know, from Halloween? And El over there is Jason from Friday the 13th.” She explained impatiently. “We’re watching Friday the 13th tonight, but I’ll be happy to show you Halloween anytime.” Her smile was wicked as she regarded the four boys.

“No way. Friday the 13th is enough.” Lucas shuddered, his cheeks flushed in embarrassment from his high-pitched squeals of fright. He accepted Max’s offered hand and she hauled him up easily.

“Who are you guys supposed to be?” El asked curiously. Mike’s face became increasingly warm as she gave him a once over. He swallowed thickly, trying to reign in the too-loud beating of his heart.

“Er... We’re our characters. From Dungeons and Dragons.” He added hastily upon El’s confused look.

“Oh!” Her face lit up with realization and suddenly she was pacing around the four of them excitedly, taking in the details of their costumes.

“Paladin, wizard, dwarf and Lucas, you must be a knight of some kind?” El pointed to each of them in turn. Mike’s jaw dropped. How did she know? Wait.

Did El remember that from the first night we met? His heart thudded

even louder in his chest.

“That’s right!.” Will said happily, adjusting his fake beard.

“Your costumes are great.” El complimented with an approving nod. She touched Will’s hat gently, marvelling at the hand stitched work.

“Thanks.” Mike blurted out, his voice cracking traitorously. He flushed when everyone turned to look at him in amusement. His friends seemed to have mercy him though and began to talk about the trick or treating plan of action instead of teasing him.

Could I be anymore of a dweeb? Mike groaned internally and then paused. *Yes. Actually I was.*

Case and point: the entire last week, when he realized what a huge, fat crush he had on El Hopper and proceeded to avoid her because quite frankly he was a hot mess.

Ever since they’d gone to Benny’s for breakfast after El’s race, Mike could hardly function around her. In between trying to calm his erratically beating heart and sneaking glances at El, he’d accidentally put his elbow in the butter dish (much to Benny’s displeasure).

It didn’t get any better come Monday. Every time he tried to talk to her, his tongue felt as though it was made of lead. Did El know that he liked her? Did she feel the same? His thoughts were so distracting and overwhelming it had been an awful week.

Mike did the only thing he could think of to avoid digging himself into an even deeper hole of dweebery: avoid El.

It was a stupid thing to do. Right from the get go Mike could see he was hurting her. He hadn’t meant to dismiss himself so abruptly (or obviously) when Max had come asking about Halloween. But he couldn’t help it.

He couldn’t stop thinking about how amazing El was. Or how she was kind and warm and pretty. All these new feelings were both exhilarating and completely terrifying for someone who had never felt more than a celebrity crush (on Princess Leia of course).

El was... unbelievably wonderful! And Mike... Well, he was... Mike.

He didn't stand a chance. And he especially believed this after his and Lucas's unfortunate run in with Troy and James.

“What’s up with you lately?” Lucas asked, surprising Mike as they biked along the path from Dustin’s house. “You’ve been acting weird all week.” It was a serious question, and Mike knew Lucas was not one to be avoided.

Lucas had a zero tolerance policy for bullshit. He wasn’t afraid to speak his mind but he also cared deeply about his friends. That was always one of the qualities Mike most admired about him. Clearly Will hadn’t been the only one to notice his strange behaviour.

They’d just parted ways with Dustin and Will after an impromptu after school homework session. It seemed the teachers were still trying to drown them in homework, so they’d tried to tackle it together with mostly positive results. Mike decided he should just come clean.

“I think I like El.” Mike blurted, slowing down his bike to a leisurely pace so he could talk with Lucas easier.

“Yeah? I like El too, we all...” Lucas gave him a confused look before comprehension dawned over his features. “Oh. OH.”

“Yeah.” Mike sighed. It was embarrassing to say it out loud, but yet he felt better somehow too.

Normally it was good to talk to Will about this kind of thing, but Mike had a feeling with how he’d been avoiding El all week that if he tried to talk to Will about it now, Will might do something drastic. Despite how kind and caring Will was, that guy could be seriously terrifying when he wanted to be.

“So what are you going to do about it?” Lucas prompted.

“What do you mean?” Mike asked, looking over at his friend. Lucas rolled his eyes.

“About El. If you like her why don’t you ask her out on a date or something?”

Mike stopped pedalling in surprise. His bike coasted to a smooth stop as he tried to think of how to best explain this to his friend. Lucas stopped his bike and looked back at Mike in bewilderment.

“I like El but... I’m me!” Mike blurted out. It was as though a dam had burst, and the horrible jumble of terrifyingly confusing thoughts tumbled past his lips. “El is amazing Lucas! She’s Eleven! The long distance track star of Hawkins High and not to mention the Cross Country! She’s so pretty and awesome and funny and I just...”

“Don’t have a shot with her.” Lucas finished his sentence.

Mike’s head whipped towards his friend in shock and irritation. Yes. That’s what Mike thought too, but to hear that one of his best friends also thought the same? Lucas seemed to read Mike’s mind and he quickly climbed off of his bike and walked it back to where Mike was standing.

“I know that’s what you were thinking Mike because I’m the same.” It was Mike’s turn to be confused, but Lucas continued. “I like Max, Mike. She’s the coolest girl I’ve ever known! I mean, have you seen her play arcade games?” Lucas was momentarily lost in a dreamy smile. “Max is amazing and pretty and it was easy to think that I don’t have a shot with her because I’m not good enough. But that’s bullshit Mike. Of course we don’t have a shot with them when we’re too scared to even take a chance. I am enough and so are you.” Lucas finished heatedly, glaring at Mike as though daring him to contradict his words.

Mike stared in amazement at Lucas. He was fairly sure his jaw was hanging open, but he didn’t care.

All week he had been so unsure of himself. El was good and amazing and wonderful; yes! But he’d placed her on this weirdly perfect pedestal. She was too good for him. He didn’t stand a chance so he shouldn’t even try. He shouldn’t even try because he was Mike Wheeler: nerd extraordinaire. Yes, he liked Dungeons and Dragons, playing arcade games and working with audiovisual equipment... but when had El ever asked more of him than that?

Both El and Max had become their friends and stuck around even after learning about and participating in their nerdy hobbies! If El didn't feel the same way as he did it would suck, yes. But what if she did? He'd never find out if he didn't at least try.

"Thanks Lucas." Mike finally managed, giving his friend a sincere smile. Lucas returned it, relieved.

"Sorry to snap at you Mike, but damn, you needed to hear that." Lucas shook his head.

"You're right. I did need that." Mike agreed sheepishly, before adding, "so... Max?"

Lucas flushed and suddenly looked embarrassed. "Don't tell the others yet, okay? I want to tell Max first."

"I promise." Mike definitely didn't have the heart to tell Lucas that he was pretty sure everyone else already knew. They exchanged equally relieved goofy smiles once more. Mike was just thinking he needed to hurry up and talk to El and apologize for being so lame all week when they were interrupted.

"Well, look what we have here James? It's two out of the four circus freaks!"

Mike's blood ran cold. He and Lucas turned in simultaneous horror to see Troy and James standing only ten feet away on the forest path. They hadn't even heard them approach! How much had they heard of his and Lucas's conversation?

"What good luck Troy, I think it's about time you make good on that promise you made." James said thoughtfully, tapping his chin. "What was that again?"

"I owe Frog Face here for that sucker punch." Troy said darkly, his beady eyes narrowed on Mike. "But I have another bone to pick with Midnight here first." The change of focus took both Lucas and Mike by surprise.

"Stay away from Mayfield. She's mine." Troy sneered. Immediately Mike realized that any chance of getting Lucas to try and run away from the two bullies completely evaporated. Somehow, Mike isn't all that

heartbroken if it meant he would get a swing at Troy for saying something like that. Luckily enough, it seemed that Troy and James hadn't heard what they were talking about—thank god. They were just here to pick a fight.

"Shut up Troy. She's not interested." Lucas spat bitterly. Troy and James moved languidly towards them, like sharks circling prey.

"Oh what? And you think someone like Red would be interested in you?" Troy laughed, "like Mayfield would be interested in your kind." Lucas bristled, his hands curled into fists.

"Screw off Troy. Max already turned you down, you're just a prick." Mike snapped.

"Don't worry Wheeler, when I'm done with Red I'll give Midnight here dibs on the seconds—" Lucas's fist connected with Troy's face and suddenly all hell broke loose. James lunged for Mike as Troy and Lucas tumbled down, fists flying.

Mike tried to get in a few hits, but ultimately James was bigger, stronger and more accustomed to throwing punches. James landed a solid punch to Mike's eye, followed by a rapid punch to the jaw. Pain flared in his face. He did his best to protect himself, but when Troy tackled Mike to the ground unexpectedly, crushing the air from his lungs, he was toast.

Lucas? Mike thought dazedly, looking for his friend. He could see Lucas's form unmoving on the forest floor beside him. Shit, shit, shit! He didn't have long to dwell on his friend's injuries when James hauled him up, holding his arms behind his back so Troy could get in a few more solid hits.

"You guys are pathetic." Troy laughed before punching Mike in the gut. He wretched, trying to simultaneously suck in air and not vomit. Another hit to the face. The coppery taste of blood filled Mike's mouth and he sagged in James's grip.

"Come on James. I'm bored of these losers." And just like that, James dropped Mike. He fell to the ground—hard, head swimming.

Troy and James walked away without even a backwards glance, their

derisive laughter fading away.

“Lucas.” Mike wheezed once he’d gained enough of his breath back, trying to scramble over to his friend. Mike shook his shoulder.

“I-I’m okay.” Lucas confirmed dazedly.

Mike swore out loud when he saw Lucas’s injuries—his face looked bad, and judging by the growing look of alarm on Lucas’s face, Mike knew he couldn’t look much better.

“Are you sure?” Mike asked worriedly, doing his best to help haul his friend up.

“Yeah.” Lucas spat a bit of the blood from his mouth, much like Mike, his lip was also split.

“Assholes.” Mike ground out bitterly; looking after the direction the two bullies had disappeared to.

They continued at a much slower pace home, moving gingerly because of their injuries. The effects of Lucas’s heartfelt speech seemed to slip further and further away. Mike couldn’t even stand up to Troy or James without getting his ass handed to him.

Wasn’t a boyfriend supposed to be able to protect the girl that he liked? How could he hope to do that if he couldn’t even protect himself or his friends?

Troy was right. Mike was pathetic.

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Mike foolishly believed Troy Wilkins right up until the moment he learned that El had single handedly taken the bully out in defence of her best friend. Someone who for at least five years had tormented Mike and his friends, proved too strong, too untouchable... was taken down by this kind, sweet, distance-running girl.

Here Mike had been worried that if he couldn’t handle Troy, how would he protect El? It was one of the thoughts that had bogged him down all week. He was pathetic. He was worthless. He was a loser.

Mike made the mistake of believing in the wrong person when instead he should have realized that El Hopper could damn well take care of herself.

“Mike? Are you coming?” El’s curious voice startled him out of his thoughts. He realized his friends were already half a block ahead of him. Clearly they decided that they could waste no more time when it came to trick or treating.

“Sorry,” Mike mumbled, quickly catching up to El. She smiled at him kindly and his heart flew right out of his chest.

“I really like your costume.” El commented, her eyes wide as she tried take in all the hustle and bustle of Halloween night. The streets were flooded with kids and teens of all ages at this point, streaming from door to door in a dizzying array of costumes.

“Thanks. I like yours too. It’s um... Flattering?” Mike finished lamely, indicating her worker coveralls and bloody plastic machete.

“Thanks. Max lent it to me.” El glanced at Max fondly, who was walking ahead between Lucas and Dustin.

“Do you like horror movies as much as Max?” Mike focused on not tripping over his own feet as he walked beside El.

“I don’t think anyone loves horror movies as much as Max does,” she grinned. “they’re not my favourite kind of movie to watch, but Max likes them so I don’t mind.” Her shoulder kept brushing against his and Mike found himself growing increasingly distracted. They are walking a little closer than necessary, but El didn't seem to mind.

“Are you actually horror movie virgins?” She glanced at him slyly. Mike flushed, both at the question and their proximity.

“Yeah. You’ve seen Lucas’s reaction to horror,” Mike stammered, “but I can’t say I like them so much either.” El nodded thoughtfully as they turned to head up the walk of their first house.

Dustin and Will chattered excitedly ahead of them. Max and Lucas are walking just before Mike and El, heads bowed together as they conversed secretly.

“Sit next to me for the movies. You can hold my hand so you don’t get too scared.” Mike stumbled on the pavement and his heart pattered to an abrupt stop.

Did I just hear her say?!

He looked to El for confirmation of some sort, there’s an adorable pinkness to her cheeks as their eyes meet and Mike is a goner, lost in her gaze.

“Trick or treat!” Dustin, Will, Max and Lucas chimed, startling Mike and El out of their small, intimate moment. He called out something that vaguely sounded like “trick or treat”, but his mind is a million miles away.

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Trick or treating flew by in a blur of the too-hard beating of his heart and the warmth of El by his side.

By the time the group circled Max’s block their bags are heavy with candy.

“Get ready for the best movies ever, stalkers.” Max led the way confidently up the steps of her home, flicking on the lights in the foyer as the six of them piled into the entry.

It’s a typical suburban home, well kept and tidy. There’s several family photos hanging on the walls and everything looks like it’s been meticulously dusted.

“The living room is just through there. I’ll go get some snacks and then we’ll get this horror movie marathon started.” Max pointed to the room to their left.

“I’ll give you a hand.” El offered. The two girls headed to the right while Will, Dustin, Lucas and Mike headed to the left.

The living room was just as meticulous as the foyer. Not a throw pillow seemed out of place on the loveseat and matching mustard coloured couch.

Dustin immediately zeroed in on a plush looking recliner in the corner and plopped down with an exaggerated sigh of content with his bag of candy between his legs. Will settled down on the side of the couch closest to Dustin.

Mike hesitated, unsure of where to sit. El said she'd hold his hand during the movie...but had she been joking? Or was she being serious?

Lucas ended up making the decision of where Mike would sit. He headed for the loveseat on the other side of the couch, leaving Mike the option of couch with Will. He settled down on the middle cushion, his candy at his feet just as El and Max reappeared, carrying an armload of snacks.

"Have I told you that I love you?" Dustin quipped, watching the two girls distribute the snacks eagerly.

"No, but it's nice to hear." El chuckled, handing him two bags of chips. She handed a few more snacks to Will before dumping the rest on the coffee table and shyly settled into the remaining space beside Mike.

"Catch stalker!" Max didn't give Lucas any time to react before she tossed the snack at him, nailing him in the face with a bag of popcorn. "Shit, sorry." Max didn't look sorry in the slightest. Lucas glared at her. She grinned and turned to fiddle with the television before Lucas could scold her anymore.

Meanwhile, Mike was trying not to panic.

Do I start holding her hand now? Do I wait until she holds mine?

"Get ready stalkers! One of the best movies ever is about to start." Max boisterously jumped up from the floor and ran into the other room. Mike, Will, Lucas and Dustin stared after her in confusion before the lights in the hall flick off and Max reappeared back into the living room. The rest of the house is eerily pitch black behind her.

"Can't we leave this light on?" Lucas asked hopefully, staring at the

living room light.

“Not a chance.” Max smirked before flicking the remaining light off and settling down on the loveseat next to Lucas without another word. Soon, the only sounds in the house were the movie and the soft crinkle of candy wrappers.

Camp Crystal Lake 1958 flashes up on the screen and then the scene changes from singing campers to the interior of a cabin and the music takes on a decidedly sinister turn. Mike jumped as a strange, harsh breathing sound begins as the camera peered around the interior cabin at the sleeping people inside.

He snuck a glance at Will and Dustin, who looked totally absorbed by the movie but not really uncomfortable. He glanced towards El, Max and Lucas. Lucas already looked completely petrified, sunken down into his seat beside Max like the couch would swallow him whole if he tried hard enough.

Max, in stark contrast looks as though she’s having the time of her life.

And El... her face is carefully blank as she returned his gaze amusedly, catching him red handed sneaking a look at her.

Flustered, Mike quickly turned back to the movie, where some teens are currently sneaking away into a barn to have a little fun. As much as Mike tries to focus on the movie, all he can think about is the girl beside him. He’s not sure if he can take much more of this. How can El affect him like this when all she’s doing is sitting right beside him?

That’s why he’s taken completely off guard when the movie takes a murderous turn.

Lucas let out a startled squeal and Max laughed loudly as the guy on screen slumped over, dead. Mike blanched. Lucas’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates, they are both unable to tear their gaze from the screen as the girl begins pleading and screaming, but is quickly silenced.

“Shit!” Dustin swore when the loud, sinister introduction of the title

comes onto the screen.

Mike knows he's not nearly as bad as Lucas when it comes to being horror, but he still can't help but feel uneasy, especially when something unexpectedly soft touched his hand, causing him to nearly jump right out of his skin. He glanced down, heart in his throat, only to see El's hand touching his own. Eyes wide, Mike looked to El. Even in the dim light of the living room, her cheeks are pink in the glow of the television. She tentatively held her hand out for his, seeking his permission.

Mike swallowed thickly, heart beating rapidly for reasons other than the horror film playing in front of them and in a split second he knew his decision. He nodded shyly and El gently slipped her hand into his.

Suddenly everything becomes perfect in the world of Mike Wheeler. El's hand fit perfectly in his and as she interlaces their fingers together he tried not to melt.

Holding hands wasn't typically done with someone that considered you just a friend... right? Maybe El felt the same way he did?

Hope blossomed in his chest and tingled all the way down to his fingers and his toes. Lucas was right. Mike had been too busy worrying about not being good enough for someone like El. But here she was, holding his hand as they watched a horror movie on Halloween.

Even as the carnage of *Friday the 13th* continued Mike felt as though he was floating, only El's hand in his to anchored him to the ground.

.

By the end of the third movie it was late and Lucas was in a dazed, horrified stupor on the loveseat beside a grinning Max.

Dustin and Will became relatively immune to the gore and violence by the second movie and instead seemed to take great fun in betting on whom would be getting massacred next. Lucas meanwhile, seemed to lose the ability to scream by the second movie and instead merely groaned in horror by the end of the third movie.

“So what did you guys think?” Max asked happily when the third movie ended, ignoring the slumped form of Lucas on the couch beside her.

“It was actually awesome.” Dustin admitted, surrounded by a pile of candy and snack wrappers.

“It was nice to finally see some of the special effects put to use that Mr. Clarke talked about in middle school science.” Will nodded. Max’s gaze moved to El and Mike, and belatedly he realized their hands were still clasped together. Max’s eyebrows shot up; she grinned at El, who looked flustered but happy.

“Oh I see you really enjoyed the movies Wheeler.” Max teased. Mike’s cheeks grew warm, but he was glad that El didn’t pull her hand away from his.

“Yeah, good movies.” It was clear to Max and Mike who he’d really been focused on.

“What about you, stalker?” Max asked cheerily, nudging a stupefied Lucas. He let out a long groan.

“It’s finally over.” Lucas moaned.

“That was only the first three. There are three more. We should watch them another time.” Max watched in satisfaction as Lucas visibly wilted.

They were all taken by surprise when light flashed through the window followed by the sound of a horn honking in the driveway.

“Whoa,” Will glanced down at his watch, “it’s already 12:30. That’s probably my mom.” He and Dustin quickly jumped up.

The time took them all by surprise, but that was the cue for everyone to get moving. El released his hand and stood up. Immediately Mike missed the feeling of her fingers entwined with his. Will and Dustin gathered their things and hurriedly headed to the foyer.

“Are you catching a ride with Will’s mom?” Max asked Lucas and Mike, who didn’t seem to be in a hurry.

“No, my mom is coming to get us pretty soon though.” Lucas explained. Max, El, Lucas and Mike followed Dustin and Will to the door to see them out.

“Thanks for coming stalkers.” Max grinned happily.

“I had a blast Mad Max. Let’s watch the rest of them some time.” Dustin nodded.

“See you later.” Will called before he and Dustin disappeared out the door.

“We can help you clean up before we have to go.” Mike offered after a moment, remembering his manners that his mother had so aptly drilled into him. Max nodded gratefully.

“Sure, that would be great.”

The four of them headed back into the living room to gather any stray candy wrappers and chip bags that had escaped. Mike got to his knees and peered under the couch, sure enough a few stray wrappers had evaded them. He gathered the garbage in his fist and put his other hand on the coffee table to balance himself as he stood up. There was a sharp pinching sensation and Mike hissed in pain, drawing his hand up for inspection.

“What happened?” Lucas asked worriedly as Mike studied his hand. Max and El peered over in concern.

“Just a splinter.” He winced at the sight of a rather large piece of wood sticking out from his finger. A spot of blood seeped from the small wound, but otherwise it looked okay.

“Oh shit, sorry Wheeler. That coffee table is older than I am.” Max apologized. “There’s a first aid kit in the bathroom, El can you help him? We’ll finish up here.” El nodded and grasped Mike’s arm, guiding him back towards the foyer.

They headed around the staircase and through another door at the end of the foyer into what looked like the laundry area. El flicked on the light in a door to their immediate left, the small half-bath coming into light.

“Have a seat.” She indicated the closed toilet and Mike dutifully sat down. It was a little squishy in the half-bath with the two of them, but neither of them minded. El kneeled down and rummaged through the cupboard under the sink.

“Here it is.” She pulled out a first aid kit, popping it open and produced a small set of tweezers. Clearly this wasn’t the first time she’d had to use the first aid kit at Max’s house.

“I can do it.” Mike offered halfheartedly as El took his hand once more. Abruptly his protests died, captivated by the feel of El’s soft hand touching his again.

“I don’t mind. Using tweezers to remove a splinter is easier with a friend.” El smiled, before her gaze dropped to the splinter in his hand. Her eyelashes are dark against her cheeks as she studied the splinter seriously and *oh god she’s biting her lip*. Suddenly Mike is overcome with the strangest urge to lean forward and close the distance between them.

“This might hurt a little.” El warned before she carefully grasped the head of the splinter with the tweezers. He’s so focused on her lips, Mike didn’t even notice if there was pain. They’re pink and soft looking and so *kissable*.

Do I have to ask to kiss her? He wondered dazedly, watching her determined face as she cautiously pulled the splinter out. It seemed like it would be bad manners to randomly kiss El, but Mike had never felt anything like this before.

“Got it!” She exclaimed happily, holding up the sizeable splinter. She dropped it into the trashcan beside the toilet before putting the tweezers and the first aid kit away.

“Did it hurt?” El asked, her eyes finally meeting Mike’s. Surprise flashed across her features when she realized how close they were, but she didn’t move away.

“No.” Mike whispered, not really knowing why he was whispering.

El’s eyes dropped to his lips and Mike realized that El had leaned a

little closer, mirroring his own movements as he leaned towards her. She's so close and Mike has never wanted anything more than to kiss El Hopper in that moment. Her eyes fluttered shut and their lips are only a breath apart when a noise startled both of them.

In a flurry of surprised movement they accidentally bonk foreheads, blushing furiously.

"What was that?" El asked, her eyes wide.

"I don't know." Mike answered, wondering if it's possible to spontaneously combust from how hot he's currently feeling.

I almost kissed El Hopper! His mind repeated over and over again. It's hard to focus on anything else.

El stood up reluctantly and peered out into the laundry area. Mike followed her, still partially lost in his thoughts but also increasingly aware that there had been a strange noise... he and El had almost kissed... and they had just finished watching several horror movies where the ones who went to "check out the strange sound" or made out were brutally murdered by a *crazy machete wielding madman*.

Thump. There was the noise again! It wasn't coming from the laundry area. It sounded more like it was coming from the foyer.

El and Mike glanced at each other before opening the laundry room door open just a crack. If it was Max and Lucas trying to scare them they weren't going to make it easy!

They both peered through the doorway, the lights in the foyer were still out, and there were two dark forms pressed against the wall by the entrance to the living room. Mike realized it was Max and Lucas, but it soon became clear that they hadn't been trying to scare their friends—because they were too busy kissing.

Both of them froze, crouched at the slightly ajar door to the laundry room, unsure of what to do.

"Max wait." They both jumped, but Lucas wasn't talking to them. Max made a noise that sounded like a whine, but she pulled away from Lucas and waited.

“What is it?” She asked breathlessly, though her voice was tinged with nervousness.

“I just wanted you to know that I think you’re cool and different and super smart.” Lucas blurted out breathlessly, blushing at Max’s stunned features. “And I think you’re just... totally tubular.”

“No one actually says that you know.” Max chuckled, finally recovering from her shock.

“Well I do now.” Lucas grinned.

“And it makes you seem really cool.” She snorted, leaning closer to Lucas once more. “I like you too, stalker.” Max admitted shyly, before tentatively closing the distance between them.

Mike finally shook off his shock. Shame coursed through him, he hadn’t meant to accidentally eavesdropped on such an intimate moment. At the same time, he felt like cheering his best friend on for having finally made his move on Max! Instead of doing that however, he very gently closed the door. El was still caught up in her shock, but once he grasped her arm and quietly pulled her up he could see the same guilt mirrored on her features. They moved wordlessly back to the bathroom and closed the door as quietly as they could.

“Wow.” El breathed, leaning against the sink.

“Yeah.” Mike agreed. Clearly Lucas had really meant it that he’d wanted to tell Max about how he felt, but Mike had to wonder... “Who do you think kissed who first?” He blurted, colouring a deep red when it dawned on him how juvenile his question sounded.

“Probably Max.” El said thoughtfully. “She’s liked Lucas for over six...” She gasped and clapped her hands over her mouth; her eyes wide in horror. “I shouldn’t have said that!” She groaned, dropping her head into her hands.

“Max has liked Lucas for over six weeks?” Mike asked curiously. El groaned again and shook her head. After a moment she looked up at him with a sharply determined look in her eyes. She stood and suddenly he was a little worried.

"You can't tell Max I let that slip. She will *murder* me." El glanced nervously towards the door as if Max would already be waiting for her outside with a butcher's knife in hand.

"I promise." Mike assured her quickly. She sighed, some of the tension melting out of her shoulders.

"I know I can trust you not to get me murdered... it's not weeks that Max has had a crush on Lucas."

There was a beat of silence as Mike processed what El had said. His jaw dropped in disbelief.

"Six *months*?"

She nodded.

"Wow." It was his turn to lean heavily against something.

Mad Max, zoomer of the Hawkins High track team had a crush on Lucas for over six months? How? When? They hadn't known each other for that long... so that meant that Max had liked Lucas even before becoming friends!

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

El shrieked in surprise, jumping a foot into the air and crashing into Mike, taking them both down in the confusion. Moments later, the door opened sharply, revealing their friends.

"Oops sorry." Max grinned.

"Max!" El gasped, glaring up from the ground at her friend.

"I said I was sorry!" Max held up her hands as though she were surrendering.

El and Mike untangled their limbs as best as they could. All the while Mike was very aware of Max's eyes burning into them. She grinned that strange, secretive grin that her and Will often wore as of late.

"My mom's here Mike." Lucas explained, his voice slightly hoarse.

“Okay, let me just grab my stuff.” Mike could scarcely look at his friend, still a little ashamed that he and El had accidentally witnessed such an intimate moment.

The four friends headed back towards the front foyer. Mike ducked into the living room to collect the meager remains of his candy stash before meeting Lucas, Max and El by the front door.

“Do you need a ride, El?” Lucas asked.

“I’m sleeping over at Max’s tonight.” El explained, “it’s our Friday night tradition. But thank you.” The light from Mrs. Sinclair’s car flooded the foyer, and though Lucas and Mike knew she was waiting, both of them were reluctant to move.

“Thanks for having us Mad Max.” Lucas finally said, giving Max a look that Mike can only describe as ‘heart eyes’. Max blushed and threw her arms around Lucas in a brief, but warm hug, surprising both of them.

“It was nice having you over, stalkers.” Max said happily, nodding at Mike. Lucas, who looked as though he were swooning, said a quick goodnight to El and stumbled dazedly out of Max’s home.

“See you tomorrow?” Mike asked hopefully, turning to El.

“Definitely.” She agreed with a sincere smile. His heart couldn’t possibly take what El did to him. Something as simple as a smile and he was putty in her hands.

“Later stalker.” Max called, breaking the small spell El had woven over him once more. Mike bid Max and El goodbye before heading outside and climbing into Mrs. Sinclair’s car.

“Good evening Michael,” Mrs. Sinclair greeted cheerily, “did you boys have fun tonight?” He pulled the car door shut behind him, settling down in the back seat of the vehicle.

“Yes Mrs. Sinclair.” Mike managed to say, though he had clearly left his mind in that foyer with a certain distance runner.

I almost kissed El Hopper.

The thought strung him through like a lightning bolt as he peered out the window, watching a darkened Hawkins speed by. They had been so close. It had been completely unplanned and Mike had no idea what he was doing, but the way El had looked at him... It was breathtaking.

His stomach flipped giddily at the thought of how El's eyes had fluttered shut and she... wait a second. *El Hopper almost kissed me.* He almost repeated the thought out loud because it sounded so unbelievable!

Not only had Mike almost kissed El... She had almost kissed him too! He'd been so busy wondering if he had a chance with El. But she had leaned towards him too.

It had to mean something and Mike Wheeler was determined to find out.

...

Saturday morning, when Mike floated down the stairs at exactly 8:00AM, his mother dropped the telephone handset in surprise. It clattered against the wall noisily and swung on its cord. Karen stared in mute shock at her son.

"Michael?" Karen asked in disbelief, looking back to the clock on the kitchen wall and then again at her son incredulously.

"Good morning mom." Mike greeted cheerily, "who's on the phone?"

"Oh!" Karen fumbled in a less than graceful manner for the handset, her eyes wide.

"Nancy! Sorry. Your brother just walked down the stairs and said good morning."

Mike ignored his mother's shell-shocked tone and headed into the kitchen. As he peered into the fridge he could hear his mother laugh, Nancy had probably said something sarcastic about him being up so early.

He got out the eggs and some potatoes, intent on having a good

breakfast before a morning at the arcade.

Saturday nights at the arcade were a thing of the past, but Mike could hardly say he minded. No one else seemed to mind either. Once his friends realized that being at the arcade for opening had an added perk of no lines, he knew they were sold.

Spreading the ingredients out on the counter and pulling out a cutting board, Mike glanced over at his mother who was still on the phone with Nancy. He knew he wasn't supposed to interrupt her when she was on the phone, but it was just Nancy.

"Mom?" Mike called.

"Just a second Nancy," Karen said before covering the handset and peering at her son curiously.

"Do you want some breakfast too?" Mike gestured to the eggs and potatoes on the counter.

For the second time that morning Karen Wheeler dropped the phone. If Mike hadn't been in such a good mood he might have been a little insulted by the way her eyes widened and she gaped at him. It was a look that one did not often see on someone as composed as his mom.

"Good morning? And now breakfast?" Karen repeated.

"Mom. Nancy." Mike chided, pointing to the handset that was once more dangling against the wall. His mom picked up the phone in a daze and Mike turned his attention back to making breakfast. He'd take his mother's stunned silence as a yes.

"Nancy, *Mike just offered to make me breakfast.*" Karen not so subtly hissed into the phone.

Mike rolled his eyes and continued washing the potatoes. There was a stretch of silence before:

"Michael. Your sister wants to talk to you."

Mike paused in surprise. Normally when his sister called it was a very short phone call where she primarily talked to their mom. He found

his feet moving automatically across the kitchen, and Mike accepted the phone from his mom with morbid curiosity.

“Hello?”

“Morning Mike. Who’s the girl?” Nancy greeted cheerily.

Mike’s cheeks immediately grew hot and he was more than aware of how their mom was watching him on the phone, her expression curious.

“What are you talking about?” Mike tried to sound casual, but his voice came out a little higher than he would have liked.

“Cut the crap Mike.” Nancy said with all the interrogation power that older siblings possessed, “Or I’ll tell mom that you have a girlfriend. You saw what happened last Thanksgiving when I told her about Jonathan.”

He shuddered. It was a very real threat and Mike knew that his sister had no qualms about exercising it, especially because he *had* seen what happened last Thanksgiving. Nancy made the fatal mistake of mentioning that she was dating Jonathan Byers and Karen immediately soared into excited mother mode. Before anyone could stop her, she began her questions.

How long had then been dating? Were they serious? Jonathan was such a nice boy and Karen had always thought so. Was he coming round for Christmas? Invite the whole Byers family for Christmas dinner! When is the wedding? That would make Michael and Will real brothers! Grandbabies in the future?

With each question Nancy had sunk a little lower in her seat, her eyes wide in horror. At the time Mike thought it was hilarious. But now, with the same potential fate awaiting him, Mike realized he needed to give into Nancy’s demands or suffer a fate that was worse than death.

“It’s El Hopper.” Mike mumbled, trying to angle his body away from his mom casually in hopes that she wouldn’t hear.

“El Hopper?” Nancy repeated, curiously. “Is she related to the Chief?”

“Yes.” Mike nodded even though Nancy couldn’t see him.

“Wow Mike, you’re dating the Chief of Police’s daughter? It was nice knowing you little brother.” She laughed. Embarrassment crawled over his skin.

“Not dating.” Mike huffed. There was a long pause.

“What? Why not? You like her don’t you?” Nancy’s tone wasn’t helping his embarrassment. He didn’t answer.

“Mike.” Nancy sighed. “Look. Girls aren’t mind readers. If you like her, you need to tell her. Otherwise someone else will snap her up.”

Mike was fairly certain his sister was alluding to her own experiences with Steve Harrington and Jonathan. Steve had been nice to his sister when they’d briefly dated, but he seemed to have the unfortunate mindset that in order to keep a girl interested you should act like you don’t care. Jonathan however had no such delusions.

“I’m trying Nancy.” Mike grumbled into the phone. He could hear something move around in the background.

“I need to get going Mike, but I’ll see you soon. I hope it goes well for you and El Hopper. Make sure to be safe if it does.” With that Nancy hung up and Mike just about combusted in embarrassment.

Be safe? *REALLY?* Mike slammed the handset down. He was so mortified by what Nancy had just said he completely forgot about his mom.

“What was that all about?” Karen asked curiously. Mike jumped as though his mom had caught him with his hand in the cookie jar and twenty cookies stuffed into his mouth.

“Nothing.” He said far too quickly for it to be convincing. Karen eyed him exasperatedly, but didn’t press it. Mike made a run for the cutting board and eggs he left on the counter.

“Breakfast will be done in twenty minutes mom.” Karen sighed and gave up her pointed gaze, moving on into the living room.

Dammit Nancy. Mike cursed inwardly as finished cutting the potatoes and threw them into the frying pan. It was difficult enough thinking about even kissing El—let alone what Nancy was suggesting!

Worse yet, she made it sound so easy to tell El his feelings.

But what could he say? *“Hey baby, wanna go steady?”* And then proceed to give El some kind of high school ring because it’s that what you did when you wanted to date someone? Or was there a difference between dating and going steady? And that was assuming El liked him enough to want to do either!

What if I’m wrong? Mike frowned as he resumed cutting up breakfast. Maybe El was just being kind. Maybe he was crazy and had been imagining that El could possibly return his feelings.

“Michael, the potatoes are burning.” His mom’s voice startled him right out of his negative thoughts.

“Oh shit!” Mike swore, turning to the stove and seeing that the potatoes were nice and brown. He’d been moving on autopilot—something that wasn’t exactly great when you had to pay attention.

“Language!” Karen scolded automatically.

Breakfast was ready forty minutes later thanks to the potato mishap.

...

Will and Dustin were already waiting at the front door of the arcade when Lucas and Mike arrived just a few minutes before ten.

“Hey guys!” Will greeted happily as Lucas and Mike pulled their bikes into the rack.

“Hey Will! Hey Dustin!” Mike returned the greeting. Lucas didn’t appear to notice, the same dopey, wide smile that he often wore around Max seemed as though it was permanently fixed to his face this morning. Mike couldn’t blame him though. He was pretty sure he’d be the same if El kissed him like that. Will nor Dustin seemed to notice the lack of greeting.

“Jonathan called this morning!” Will burst out excitedly, “he’s coming home for Thanksgiving!”

“That’s great Will.” Mike smiled, while inwardly cursing his sister.

So that’s what she’d meant by “I’ll see you soon.” If Jonathan was driving back, of course Nancy would too. He’d been so embarrassed by her other comment he hadn’t even thought about it.

“He said he’s got so many cool photos to show me! And more music.” Will rambled excitedly, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“You should tell him to pick up some cool snacks since he’s coming home.” Dustin’s comment drew a strange look from Will and Mike. Lucas still had his head in the clouds and didn’t react.

“What? I bet there’s loads of unique, super awesome snacks in New York.” Dustin said irritably, wondering why his friends were looking at him like he’d grown a second head. “All I’m saying is it would be really cool if your brother bought some... And was willing to share with me.”

“I don’t think you’d share Dustin, so why should Jonathan?” Will teased.

“I’ll have you know I’m a great snack sharer!” Dustin protested, outraged. This time even Lucas levelled Dustin with a disbelieving stare.

“Okay, okay so I’m not the best at sharing snacks or anything but wait—El! Vouch for me here! I gave you one of my beloved pudding cups one time right?”

Mike and Lucas turned around so fast they nearly conked heads. The two girls appeared to have skated today, but must have picked up their boards at the other end of the parking lot. They’d snuck up on Lucas and Mike, whose backs were turned in that direction but Dustin had seen them coming.

“That’s right.” El agreed her curls bobbing with a serious nod at Dustin. “You gave me your beloved pudding cup in my hour of need.”

“And I’d do it again Hopper.” Dustin held his hand up for a high five, which El seamlessly accepted.

“Hey stalkers.” Max greeted happily, cozying up a little to Lucas. Will and Dustin exchanged a surprised glance when Max didn’t move away and instead stayed quite firmly beside their friend, whose ears were rapidly turning red at the tips.

“H-hey! Mad Max! I mean Max.” Lucas’s voice cracked.

Oh my god. Mike thought with a dawning horror, *is this what I’m like around El all the time?*

“Hi Mike.” El greeted softly. His stomach fluttered when their eyes met.

“Hi El.” He said just as softly.

She looked so pretty today. Her curls were mussed from the helmet tucked under her arm and her cheeks were flushed from the exertion of skateboarding. She wore a simple grey sweater under some overalls and yet Mike had never seen someone so cute.

Will and Dustin shared yet another look at the two interactions going on before them. There was as soft *click!* as the front door of the arcade was unlocked, not that Max, Lucas, Mike or El seemed to notice.

“Well, I’m going to go ahead and play some games while you guys stay out here and make googly eyes at each other.” Dustin said loudly, heading into the arcade. Will chuckled and followed him, leaving the two pairs outside. Mike sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck and held the door open for El.

The six friends fell into an easy, Saturday morning routine. Lucas was on a temporary break from Dragon’s Lair, claiming “game fatigue” and was currently trying his luck in beating Max’s score on *Galaga*. Max stayed to both coach and make fun of Lucas as he played.

Dustin went to take on the high scores in *Centipede* with Will, Mike and El calling out encouragement. After four times of utter failure, Dustin was depressed.

"I'll never beat Mad Max's score." Dustin wailed, resting his face against the glass of the screen.

Will patted his friend on the back as if to say "there, there".

"Don't give up," El cheered, "I'll go win you some candy. That will get your spirits back up." Dustin perked up immediately.

"Win me some pocket rockets?" He asked, eyes shining with hope.

"Sure." She giggled.

"You're the best El." Dustin sighed happily. She waved him off and began to head towards the claw crane.

"Er... I'm just going to... go. With El." Mike said lamely. Will gave him a knowing look before he slipped off to follow her.

"I've come to cheer you on." Mike explained when El caught sight of him. "Not that you need it." He added.

"I appreciate the moral support." El smiled and deposited her coin into the slot of the claw crane.

Mike casually stood beside El, watching her maneuver the claw over the well-stocked prize bin. Her eyes never once left the sizeable bag of Pocket Rockets wedged in the middle of the prize area and as soon as the claw was lined up to El's satisfaction, she hammered the drop button.

She's beautiful, Mike sighed mentally, *and I almost kissed her last night.* The image of El's eyelids fluttering closer as she leaned towards him flitted across his thoughts. His cheeks burned as they watched the claw effortlessly grab the Pocket Rockets and drop them into the chute.

Should I bring up last night?

Before Mike could make up his mind, El fished out the bag of candy with a pleased smile.

"Do you want anything?" El asked, motioning to the prizes.

Just for you to hold my hand again. Mike thought mentally, lost in the dazed admiration of El's amazingly cool abilities at the claw crane machine.

That's why he was taken completely off guard when El gently laced her fingers through his, her face an impressive shade of pink.

Holy shit did I just say that out loud?

"Holy shit did I just say that out loud?" Mike asked, looking down at their entwined hands with comically wide eyes. El could only nod, shyly avoiding his gaze. She gave his hand a little squeeze that made him feel warm all over, pulling him in the direction of their friends.

"Mike, I've been meaning to ask you." El didn't stop walking but she slowed down a little to give them more time.

"Yeah?" Mike managed hoarsely, hoping that his hand wasn't sweaty or clammy or too uncomfortable. Anything for her to keep holding his hand.

"Could Max and I join your next Dungeons and Dragons game?" Mike snapped out of his dazed stupor so fast he nearly gave himself whiplash. His voice failed him and he simply stared at her in astonishment.

"Um... It was just a thought. You mentioned it back when we first met and I've been curious about it ever since. I wasn't sure if anyone could join but Max said she'd give it a try too and I remember you mentioned you were the Dungeon Master so if it were possible to join you'd know. And then your costumes on Halloween got me thinking again, but that's okay if you don't want to show us the game. I'd be happy just watching at first if it's too much trouble." El rambled nervously.

Mike thought he'd wanted to kiss El Hopper before, but the surge of sheer affection that coursed through him right now was nothing compared to last night.

El was asking him if she could join Dungeons and Dragons? The same game Mike had loved for years and yet as soon as he talked about it

outside of his friends he either got a glazed look, a sneer or a derisive “nerd” thrown his way. His own family dismissed his hobbies, but here was El—wonderful, caring and just *amazing*, asking about playing with them? His heart thrummed with happiness, affection and whispers of something even deeper inside his heart.

“Sorry, I just thought I’d ask and...” Seeing El wilt in uncertainty rebooted his brain. He squeezed her hand, sweeping his thumb over her knuckles. She trailed off, her eyes wide.

“El. I’d love it if you played Dungeons and Dragons with us. I’ll let you know when we’re playing next.” Mike said seriously.

“Oh.” El mumbled, her cheeks flushing. “Okay.” She beamed brightly, relieved and happy all in one.

They resumed their walk back to Dustin and Will. El didn’t drop his hand when they reached the other two and Mike felt as though he would burst into tiny heart shaped confetti all at once.

When Will caught sight of their clasped hands he smiled broadly, but didn’t say a word. Dustin either didn’t notice, or didn’t care when he saw El and Mike, immediately zeroing in on his candy.

“You rock El!” Dustin said happily, accepting the candy with a toothy smile. “Now watch me defeat your tyrant of a best friend once and for all!”

“I heard that, Henderson!” Max shouted threateningly from a few aisles over. Will, Mike and El laughed as Dustin flinched.

The rest of the morning at the arcade flew by. Mike was beginning to think his sister wasn’t so crazy in her advice. Girls were not mind readers. El didn’t know how much Mike liked her. She didn’t know that she was often the first thing he thought of in the morning or how seeing her just made his day instantaneously better. She didn’t know how she made his heart race with something as simple as a kind smile, or how beautiful she was when she had her game face on.

Nancy said if he wasn’t careful, someone else would snap El up. He already had a close call of what that would feel like when he’d mistakenly thought Will and El liked one another.

El had almost kissed him, and here she was holding his hand at the arcade the next day! That had to mean she at liked him a little too.

I need to tell her.

Not now. But soon.

For now, Mike enjoyed the feeling of El's fingers laced with his own and the company of his friends for the rest of Saturday morning.

...

Something was different.

Much like the shift in weather as October gave way to November; something had shifted once more between Mike and El.

The arcade during the weekend was like a dream. Mike and El had stayed close together all morning; their fingers laced together and shoulders brushing. Mike had never felt so assured of his movements. Something about the way that El looked at him now... it was mesmerizing.

For the first time since realizing how he felt about El, Mike wanted to tell her. Even if she ended up rejecting him, at least then she would know how awesome Mike thought she was. There would be no more what ifs or uncertainty because it would be all out in the open for the better, or worse. It was just finding the right moment that Mike was currently struggling with. He didn't want to just blurt it out and instead resolved to try and tell her next weekend.

So when Monday morning rolled in with the announcement of a group presentation with a partner of your choice for American History, Mike knew exactly who to look to.

As soon as Ms. Hotchkiss finished briefing the class on the presentation Mike looked towards the back of the classroom.

El smiled shyly, she was already halfway to his seat.

"Partners?" She asked hopefully, coming to a stop just in front of his desk.

“Partners!” Mike agreed happily. El smiled in relief and grabbed a vacated chair, sitting down in front of him.

“What topic do you want to cover?” El asked, glancing towards the chalkboard. Mike peered around El (which was harder than it sounded because she looked so pretty today) and skimmed over the list of history topics. Each topic was broken into a chapter from their textbook.

“The American Revolution is always a good one to write about.” Mike suggested tentatively. El looked thoughtful.

“I’m good with that one if you are. There’s plenty of material in the library for that topic.” She agreed happily.

“Great.” Mike smiled, getting up from his seat. “I’ll go let Ms. Hotchkiss know before it’s taken.”

Heading up to the front of the classroom, Mike couldn’t help but think how he used to dread any class without one of his friends in it. Getting homework if he was ill was always an issue, but secondly and even worse: group projects. Time after time Mike was always the last picked partner, out of necessity, not because it was the other person’s choice. More often than not he would be tagged on to a group of two as the odd one out, an arrangement that neither he nor they were ever happy about.

At the beginning of the year when Ms. Hotchkiss had told them there would be a group presentation with a partner of your choice, his stomach had sank. But now, as Mike informed Ms. Hotchkiss of their topic choice, his heart soared. This presentation actually couldn’t have come at a better time! Mike needed an excuse to see El alone, and this would give him a chance.

Mike shot El thumbs up as soon as he finished talking to Ms. Hotchkiss. She smiled happily, her slightly crooked toothed grin sending a warm, tingling sensation through his chest.

“We got it.” He confirmed as he sat down.

“We could work on it at my place this weekend.” El offered, glancing

down at her notebook excitedly.

“After the arcade?” Mike countered. The presentation wasn’t due until just before Christmas break, so they had plenty of time before then.

El nodded solemnly. “I take my position as Max’s good luck charm very seriously.”

Mike snorted and El’s serious façade caved with a grin.

“We could stop at the library to get some reference and then bike to your home?”

“My place is pretty far out, do you mind biking?” She hesitated.

“No, I don’t mind at all. As long as you’re okay riding with me that long?” Mike asked nervously. Maybe El wasn’t comfortable being that close to him for so long... he shouldn’t have assumed—

“I like riding with you.” El’s words stopped his self-doubt cold. His throat was suddenly dry and Mike was glad for the lunch bell ringing only a moment later.

“Lunch time!” Mike said hoarsely, standing up abruptly. El giggled and followed Mike’s lead, standing and gathering her supplies before the two of them began their usual route to El and Max’s locker.

“Max is going to meet us in the AV Club room today.” El explained, grabbing her lunch from her locker and switching out the books she’d need for the afternoon. Once that was done, the two of them headed towards the clubroom and immediately walked into a rather strange looking situation.

“OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD.” Dustin blathered over and over again; he and Will were shrunk into the right corner of the room. Will’s face was beet red, his eyes wide in horror.

Max and a dazed looking Lucas were on the other side of the room.

“What is going on?” Mike asked. He was a little alarmed that none of his friends seemed to notice their arrival at first. Dustin jumped at

Mike like a drowning person clutching at a life preserver.

“Mike! President Mike! Lucas and Max were making out in here!” Max rolled her eyes so hard that Mike was genuinely surprised they didn’t roll right out of her skull.

“Making... Making out in here?” Mike asked, certain he hadn’t heard Dustin correctly.

“Yes! We were making out in here. Won’t happen again.” Max snapped irritably.

“It shouldn’t have happened at all!” Dustin held an embarrassed looking Will around the shoulders, “my poor baby just had his innocence taken from walking in on you making out.”

Lucas finally seemed to snap out of his daze, only to blurt: “Max is my girlfriend! I asked her and she said yes!”

At this, everyone turned to Max and Lucas.

“Really?” El gasped happily, her eyes widening.

“Yeah.” Max was currently trying to nonchalantly play off the fact that she was as red as a tomato. The mood of the room immediately shifted.

“That’s great! I’m happy for you two.” El threw her arms around Max, who buried her face in her shoulder, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Mad Max and Lucas? Together? I’m doomed in the arcade aren’t I?” Dustin clapped Lucas on the back happily, congratulating him. Even Will had forgotten his embarrassment in walking in on Max and Lucas making out and congratulated the two of them.

Lunch took on the jovial atmosphere of a party. Max and Lucas were noticeably red the entire lunch hour, but flustered and happy.

Dustin and Will quickly discovered that the joy of walking in on two friends making out would supply them with endless amounts of teasing material for years to come.

...

Just like that, Saturday afternoon was upon him.

"Are you sure you don't want to come to Benny's?" Dustin asked as the group loitered outside of the arcade. The six of friends had spent a fun morning wasting numerous quarters at the arcade.

"We need to work on our presentation." El shrugged apologetically. "But next time for sure."

"Good luck!" Will bid them cheerily. Lucas, Max, Dustin and Will headed towards Benny's while Mike and El watched them go.

"Are you good to go?" Mike asked shyly. All day his heart felt as though it would flop out of his chest at any moment. He was looking for the right moment to talk to El and it was making him dizzy with nerves.

"Yes." El climbed onto the bike behind him without further ado. He kicked off once he was sure she was balanced and pedalled hard towards the library.

Their stop was quick; they'd done research during the week at the school library in order to know what books to ask the librarian for. They checked out five each and were soon back on the bike.

With the added weight of the textbooks it was a noticeably harder bike ride, but Mike really didn't mind. El tucked her chin on his shoulder so they could talk as they biked and by the time they reached Hopper Cabin, Mike was breathless from talking and biking.

"We should walk from here." El explained.

They'd pulled off to the side of a highway where there was a small break in the trees. Most of the leaves had drifted to the ground, leaving the trees naked. They fell into a comfortable step with one another as El led the way into the forest, Mike walking his bike carefully between them.

A little less than ten minutes later a small cabin came into view.

“Watch your step!” She said suddenly, startling Mike. He stopped mid step and looked down.

“It’s a tripwire” El explained, kneeling down and pointing to a thin wire suspended about six inches from the forest floor. “Hopper took some extra precautions since we live so far out.”

“I’ll just park my bike here then.” Mike said, pulling his bike back a few steps and leaning it against a tree. El waited patiently for him before they carefully stepped over the wire together and continued on towards the cabin.

El undid the three locks on the front door and pushed it open, stepping in from the chilly November air and into the warmth of the cabin.

“Welcome to Hopper Cabin!” She said happily, gesturing in a sweeping motion with her arm as though she were unveiling a brand new sports car.

Mike took in the small, cozy interior. There was a living area with a couch and a chair, a small kitchen with an even tiny dining table and a few doors off the main room. There was a wood stove in the corner, casting a warm glow.

“It’s nice.” Mike meant it. It was warm and lived in. Though everything was old and very vintage looking, evidence of Hopper and El was everywhere.

El took off her coat, prompting Mike to do the same.

“I need to stoke the wood stove, but make yourself comfortable. It’s probably easier to work in the living room right now. Hop has some files on the kitchen table and he gets grumpy when I move them.” El talked about Hopper as though he were a cuddly teddy bear instead of the scowling, gruff Chief of Police that could make Mike freeze with just a stern glance.

“Do you like living with Hopper?” The question slipped past his lips before he could help it. El appeared thoughtful as she reached for a log in a small, neat stack near the wood stove.

“Yes.” El began, opening the stove and poking around at the coals inside. “It wasn’t so great at first I’ll admit, when I didn’t know anyone but Hopper and we weren’t always on the best terms.” Mike kicked off his shoes, distractedly watching in the orange light cast by the wood stove.

“But now, I am happy. Hopper is... great. More than great. He makes time for me and feeds me Eggos.” She smiled over at Mike and he couldn’t help but return the action.

“Did you know Hopper before he adopted you?” Mike cringed as soon as the question left his mouth.

Wow. That was insensitive—I shouldn’t pry. Even if he wanted to know more about El, it didn’t mean she was comfortable sharing such private details. He’d really put his foot in his mouth.

“Sorry—I shouldn’t have—“

“It’s okay Mike.” She closed the wood stove and stood up. “I trust you.” The sincerity in her eyes left him breathless. She led him to the couch and they both sat down.

“Hopper adopted me after he caught me stealing Eggos from a grocery store.” She took a deep breath. “My mom died when I was eleven. For a whole year I ran away from the social workers and whatever home they tried to put me into. Eventually I tried to leave the state... That’s when Hopper caught me at the grocery store trying to steal Eggos for the trip.” El smiled wistfully, her eyes cast downwards.

“About a month after, Hopper asked me if I wanted to try living with him as a foster home instead. I said yes. We fought a lot at first, but after that... well, Hopper asked me on my thirteenth birthday if I wanted to be adopted by him officially. I said yes, and now I’m El Hopper.”

Mike’s sat there, completely dumbfounded. He had never realized. El had a hard life so far but yet she was so kind. Shame raced over his skin, how had he known so little about her past? He’d never wanted to pry, because adoption seemed like such a private matter. Then

again, El seemed to be a very private person and Mike respected that. That she trusted him enough to tell him... well, the gravity of that trust was not lost on him.

"I'm glad you're here now." Mike did the only thing he could think in that moment. He carefully wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a gentle hug. He could feel her melt against him and he tightened his hug just a little. Her wild mop of curls tickled his chin as they stayed like that. He didn't let go until she was ready to pull away.

"Thanks for listening." El mustered a smile and they both chuckled. She reached down and laced their fingers together, looking contemplative as she studied their hands.

Mike's heart was beating so loudly it felt as though it were throwing itself like a battering ram against his ribcage.

"I guess we should get started on our presentation." El said reluctantly after a short pause, her cinnamon eyes were dark as she looked at him with something that even Mike could not name in their depth.

The seriousness of the moment slipped away as the two teenagers brought out their study materials, their hands remained together even as they began their work.

.

For the next several hours Mike and El worked hard, trudging through the books they had borrowed from the library and writing down important notes to refer back to later. Both were taken by surprise when the click of the lock disrupted the quiet of the cabin. El glanced up at the clock hanging on the kitchen wall, her eyes widening.

"Hey kid, who's bike is out..." Hopper trailed off as he came in and saw El and Mike sitting on the floor in front of the couch together. Perhaps sitting a little *too* close to be considered friendly. They'd had to let go of each other's hands as the afternoon progressed, working on their notes.

“Hi Hop.” El greeted happily, unperturbed by her adopted father’s stern gaze on the two of them. Mike on the other hand, was faring far differently.

“Hi Chief! Uh sir. Uh. Sir Chief.” Mike was wondering if he should move from his spot beside El and start saluting? Or if he moved did that make him look guilty?

What was there even to be guilty about? It’s not like they’d been making out or anything. They were just studying.

“Just Hopper, kid.” Hopper sighed, hanging his hat on the hook at the door.

“I didn’t realize what time it was.” El got up from the floor and stretched, a few of her joints cracking.

“I should probably get going.” Mike followed El’s lead, stretching his stiff limbs as he stood up from the floor. Their notes and books were scattered all over the living room floor.

“We could work on our presentation tomorrow afternoon again you want?” El asked hopefully. Mike didn’t hear Hopper protest this and he nodded.

“I’ll just have to clear it with my mom tonight, but I’ll call you and let you know?” Mike went to clean the papers off the floor.

“Leave it kid, if you’re working on it tomorrow then it can stay for now. It gets dark out here fast, so you should get a move on.” Hopper’s voice was suddenly much closer than Mike anticipated.

“Okay.” Mike agreed, grabbing his coat from the armchair and heading towards the door.

“I’ll walk you to the road. Things look different out here when it gets darker.” El offered, grabbing her coat too. Mike tried not to feel too intimidated by Hopper’s stare as the two teens put their shoes on.

“Back in a minute Hop.” El chimed, opening the door.

“Goodnight er... Hopper.” Mike bid the Chief a quick goodbye.

Hopper returned it with what sounded like a grunt before the two teens slipped outside.

November had definitely graduated from chilly to cold when nighttime fell. The sun was starting to dip below the trees and their breath came out in puffy white clouds. He was glad for the warmth of his jacket as they walked towards his bike.

“Watch your step.” El reminded him once more, pointing out the tripwire.

Once over the tripwire, Mike tilted his bike upright and the two continued walking towards the highway. He was glad El had walked him out, because she was definitely right, the forest looked much different in the dying light and he could have easily gotten lost.

A few minutes later they were standing at the road. Mike was halfway onto his bike, but not really wanting to leave El just yet.

“Thanks for having me over this afternoon.”

“We got a lot done.” El said happily, before shyly adding, “maybe next time you could come over just for fun.”

Yes, yes, yes. Mike’s heart beat erratically. Was now the moment? Should he tell her how he felt about her? Should he ask her on a date?

“That would be great.” Mike agreed as calmly as he could. Before he could make up his mind about whether or not this was the moment—El did something that completely fried his brain.

“Goodnight Mike.” El pressed her lips to his cheek softly.

When Mike finally realized what had just happened, El was long gone and he was sitting there like a frozen human Popsicle.

The whole ride home his cheek was warm where El kissed him.

...

The next day, El was waiting for him on the side of the highway, her

hands tucked into the sleeves of her mustard yellow sweater, a bright smile on her face. His cheek still tingled where she'd kissed him and he couldn't help but hope for another goodbye kiss later today.

They exchanged happy, somewhat breathless greetings before they headed into the forest towards Hopper Cabin.

The sunlight warmed their backs as they walked, leaves crunching beneath their feet. Soon, they are wrapped up in the warmth of Hopper Cabin, shaking off the remnants of the chilly November day.

"I'm glad you could make it." El plopped down onto the floor in front of the couch, where their nest of books and written notes awaited.

"Me too." Mike agreed happily, settling down beside her. They shared a brief smile before Mike began rummaging around in his bag.

"Maybe after this we could get Benny's?"

The question catches Mike on the hop. He stopped rummaging and turned to look at El. She peered back at him; her warm brown eyes alight with hope and nervousness.

Is she asking me on a date? Mike wondered dazedly, but he can feel his head nodding itself exuberantly to her question.

"Great." El breathed, looking down back to their notes with a relieved smile.

Mike resumed rummaging through his backpack, searching for his notebook. He couldn't seem to find it. Was it in the other pockets? Frowning, he zipped open the other two compartments and found nothing.

Shit.

"I'm such a dweeb." Mike groaned into his backpack. "I forgot my notebook."

"There's one on the kitchen counter you could borrow." She offered helpfully. Mike shot El a grateful smile, getting up from the ground and heading towards the small kitchen. Sure enough, there was a

notebook lying on the counter beside some breakfast dishes. He snagged it and flipped randomly to a page towards the back of the notebook, that way he wouldn't interrupt the flow of any of El's previous notes.

It opened to page towards the back, but much to his surprise, there was already El's neat handwriting scrawled across the page. He went to switch pages, but something caught his eye. With growing curiosity, he scanned the first sentence:

(1) Befriend Party

Before he could stop himself Mike read the next sentence too:

(2) Introduce Max to Lucas. Maybe they'll get to know each other!

What... What was this? Introduce Max to Lucas?

The words blurred as Mike stared at the notebook unseeingly. Suddenly things began to make sense. El's rather sudden introduction into the Party's lives had given her an opportunity to introduce Max to the boy she liked. After all, El admitted herself how Max had a crush on Lucas for six months. Had this all been a cruel joke? Had becoming friends just been a way for El to get Max close enough to Lucas? And now that they were dating would it all be over? Had El used the Party... had she used *him*?

Humiliation scorched across his skin as he stared at the list in front of him.

How could I be so stupid? Mike dropped the notebook back onto the counter. He felt hot and sick and humiliated all at once.

How could I think El would ever want to get to know us? That she'd want to get to know me? She's a jock! A track star! Why would she ever like a dweeb like me?

Tears stung at his eyes but he ignored them, setting the notebook down as calmly as he could manage.

"I have to go."

El's head whipped towards him, staring uncomprehendingly as he reached for his jacket and began to gather his things without another word.

"What? Is everything okay?" El asked hesitantly.

Mike couldn't look at her.

"Yes." He said firmly, not noticing how El flinched away at his cold tone.

"Did you want me to walk you out?" She asked hopefully, but shied back when finally Mike turned to her.

"I don't know. Is that all part of your plan?" Mike bit out, tone dripping with sarcasm. El stared at him, completely at a loss.

He gathered the last of his school stuff and moved to the front door.

"Mike? Please don't leave. What's wrong?" She asked in a small voice.

"Why don't you just check your notebook to refresh your memory? See you later El." Mike muttered.

With that, he stepped out of the cabin, closing the door behind him with a sense of finality and tried to banish the devastated look on El's face from his mind.

In the cool autumn air Mike gasped sharply, trying not to let his heart crumble in his chest.

How could I be so stupid? El would never like someone like me.

...

The sound of the closing door was deafening in the suddenly empty cabin.

El didn't understand what just happened. She'd been so excited for another day with Mike. Especially because she was going to tell him everything: how he made her heart feel like she'd just run a marathon whenever he smiled at her, or how much she loved to

spend time with him and hold his hand, how kind and pretty and good she thought he was...

What went wrong? Why did he look so hurt?

With wobbly legs El stood and headed to the kitchen, where her notebook lay on the counter. She picked it up; a growing knot of dread twisted in her chest. She flipped it over and her heart dropped.

It was the list she'd made over a month ago.

(1) Befriend Party.

(2) Introduce Max to Lucas. Maybe they'll get to know each other!

(3) All of us –

All of us... nothing. A single drop of wetness smudged the last two words beyond repair.

8. Hammer to Fall

The first two numbered lines were still in tact.

(1) *Befriend Party*. And (2) *Introduce Max to Lucas*. *Maybe they'll get to know each other!* but the third point had been obscured. It read (3) *All of us* – nothing. Because the last two words had been smudged.

Horror twisted across her skin as the list stared up at her accusingly. Mike must have misunderstood. Without context the list read like she had only befriended the Party because she only wanted to introduce Max and Lucas—and nothing else. It didn't convey how badly El had wanted to become their friend. It didn't convey how much the Party had come to mean to her.

It didn't tell Mike how much *he* meant to her.

El didn't bother grabbing her jacket or her shoes and ripped the cabin door open, racing out in the cold November air.

“Mike!” El called desperately. Her head swam with panic. He was already beside his bike, ready to mount it.

Mike didn't look at her, but El didn't care. She scrambled over to him, ignoring the bite of the cold against her skin.

“I know it looks bad Mike but it's just a really silly list I made when I —“

“When you what? Planned to infiltrate our party?” He snapped, “wow El. I bet you had a good laugh at the dweebs huh?” El reeled back as though he'd slapped her.

“That's—that's not what it was Mike!” El's voice was rising and so was Mike's.

“That list meant nothing I—”

“Oh so you didn't want to introduce Max so she could start dating Lucas?” Mike asked sarcastically, his eyes narrowed.

El's words died in her throat. Of course she'd wanted to introduce Max to Lucas, but didn't Mike understand she'd wanted both? Had he not read the third point of her list? Did he not understand how much she'd wanted to become friends?

But she couldn't lie to him and claim otherwise either.

"Well yes but—" El stammered.

"So you admit you just used us... you used me." Mike jutted his chin out stubbornly, his posture rigid.

"I didn't. Mike. Please, you have to believe me. Yes I wanted to introduce Max to Lucas, but I wanted to be friends too." Frustration was making her throat raw.

Finally Mike looked at her, his gaze swam with betrayal and hurt.

Why didn't he believe her? Hot tears pricked at her eyes when he turned away.

"I thought you were different El. I thought..." Mike trailed off, his shoulders hunched as though he would crumble in on himself. Instead of continuing his thought, he climbed onto his bike.

"Mike." El's voice cracked. He wouldn't even look at her. She reached out to grasp his arm, willing him to understand that he was wrong. El cared so, so, so much about Mike. She cared so much about their friends—had he not known that?

"What's *wrong* with you?"

El released Mike as though he'd burned her, the breath *whooshed* right out of her lungs. Mike kicked off and she watched him go, her head swam dangerously with a demented myriad of emotions—desperation, hurt and sadness ripped through her all at once.

Of all the questions Mike could have asked her... why did he have to ask a question that she'd been asking herself for years? It was as though a raw strip had been torn from her back. She wasn't sure how long she stood there, the cold floor of the forest biting into her bare feet or the chill of the wind dipping down her spine but El couldn't shake the sense of finality in Mike's departure.

She barely remembered stumbling into the cabin and calling Max's house.

"El? It's a bad time to call." Max's voice was low. That was her code for: *Billy's visiting*.

"Max, can we meet?" El managed to choke out into the phone.

"Regular place." Max said immediately, and hung up the phone. Another code. Regular place meant the park around the corner from Max's house.

She grabbed her sweater and running shoes and wrote a sloppy note for Hopper before taking off. El ran blindly through the forest and onto the highway, not caring how her lungs burned and how her breaths came out in pained gasps by the time she reached the park.

Max was already waiting for her when El arrived and never had the long distance runner felt so relieved to see her.

It was a bad weekend to be at Max's house (it was Billy's weekend to visit), but yet there she was: her best friend. As soon as El got close to Max she broke down.

All the tears and hurt and shame surged through El and she cried pitifully into Max's favourite red sweater. The red head gently sat her down on the park bench. Luckily there was no one else in the park, leaving them in privacy.

"El? What's wrong?" Max's voice was thick with worry. She'd never seen El like this before and it was scaring her.

"I screwed up Max." El's voice wobbled and she couldn't stop the stream of tears down her cheeks. El didn't even bother wiping them away as she tried to explain.

"Mike found a list I made after I first met them. I made it the same time we were making our last 'dispose of Troy' lists." El laughed bitterly, it came out choked with tears and mucus from her crying.

"A list? What kind of list?" Max asked.

Instead of trying to tell Max, El grabbed the crumpled list from her pocket and held it out for her to take. As she slowly unfurled the list El began to ramble:

“Mike saw the list, but misunderstood. He thought I was just using them. But he didn’t let me try to explain...” El trailed off when she noticed the expression her best friend was making. It was a strange look. A look crossed between anger and humiliation not unlike the one Mike had worn.

“Max?” El asked worriedly. The Californian seemed to snap out of it and she crushed the list in her fist.

“What the *fuck* El? Introduce me to Lucas really?” The ferocity of Max’s response was completely unexpected.

“Max?” El stared at the red head uncomprehendingly. Max made a disgusted noise and pushed away from El.

“Maybe they’ll get to know each other? So what? You were just trying to play matchmaker or some shit? You promised me El.” She had never seen Max so angry.

“I specifically asked you if it was a scheme! But you promised me and I believed you. You lied to me.” Max trembled, her hands balling into fists.

“What?” El gasped, horrified. “No! I didn’t lie to you, I just thought because you had a crush on Lucas that it was a good chance to introduce you to him.” It was hard to breathe, things had gone wrong again so quickly and she was only trying to understand *why*.

“Well that was presumptuous of you.” Max snapped, “I thought you of all people would understand that I hate being controlled.”

The venom in her words stung and finally realization dawned over El why her best friend was so upset.

Max’s abusive, domineering and violent older stepbrother Billy had always tried to control her. He was manipulative and devious. He’d tried to control her actions, the people she hung out with... and Max was terrified he would find out she was dating Lucas and try to

control that too.

El had tried to play matchmaker in what she'd believed to be a harmless way—but it wasn't harmless to Max. El was her best friend. She was supposed to know how much she hated to be controlled in any way. And yet El had gone and done it anyways, even though her intentions had been good.

Max turned away abruptly and for the second time that day El could see a friend slipping away from her.

She couldn't let Max leave. Not without apologizing.

"I'm sorry. " El's voice warbled. Max glared at her and stepped further away.

"Just... just go away El. I don't need a friend like you." It was with those words that she left El alone and stunned in the park.

...

Hopper nearly had steam pouring out of his ears by the time El wandered home. She spotted him in the darkness of the forest, a lit cigarette dangled from his mouth as he sat on the stairs. He didn't say a word as El approached and she couldn't bring herself to say anything either. She walked right past him and into the cabin and she could hear Hopper get up and stomp up the stairs behind her.

"Where have you been?" Hopper demanded slamming the cabin door shut behind him. He wasn't expecting was an armful of his adoptive daughter. El threw herself at Hop, wrapping her arms around the normally stern faced Chief of Police.

Hopper was startled by her reaction and froze.

In the past their fights would have escalated because they were each too proud to back down, but this reaction was completely unexpected. Normally El would have been raising her voice right back. Between the two of them in the beginning, a lot of doors were slammed and various things thrown around the room. Perhaps he and El were too similar in that regard. But now...

Tentatively Hopper wrapped his arms around his adoptive daughter and hugged her tightly.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Hopper’s angry voice melted away to his soothing ‘I’m not angry anymore’ voice. He stroked the top of El’s head comfortingly. “What’s wrong kid? Are you hurt?”

El shook her head, still buried in Hopper’s chest and refused to come out just yet.

“Bad fight.” El mumbled into Hopper’s shirt.

“You got into another fight?” Hopper asked worriedly. El shook her head once more.

“Bad fight with Mike. And Max.” She explained in a small voice. She could feel the tension leave Hopper’s body when he realized she hadn’t meant a fistfight.

They stood there for a long moment, Hopper simply held her and let El snuffle and into his jacket. She’d cried out most of her tears on the walk home and now she was aching with exhaustion. Her eyes stung, they were puffy and swollen and her upper lip was raw from all the tears.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Hopper asked.

“Not tonight.” El shook her head for the third time. “I just want to go to bed.” She pulled away gently and took a deep breath. Concern was etched into Hopper’s tired features, but he doesn’t push her to talk.

“Okay kid. Try to get some sleep.” They both knew the words were empty. When El is this upset she likely won’t get any sleep and if she does, it certainly won’t be restful.

El closed the door to her room and let the familiar atmosphere wash over her. Normally being in her room is a comfort, but tonight it feels vastly empty. The banner her friends made for her stared accusingly from the wall as she melted into bed, clutching at the heavy quilt and pulling it around her body.

Tonight... tonight seemed as though it would never end. El can only hope the morning sunshine makes everything seem a little brighter.

...

The morning sunshine didn't help at all because it was just as grey and miserable as El outside.

Hopper found her at the table, nursing what looked like her eighth pot of coffee. El knew she looked like shit, she could feel the dark circles under her eyes pressing against her throbbing skull. She would have burst out laughing this morning if she wasn't so glum when she saw her face in the mirror—she looked like an alien! Her skin was splotchy and red and her eyelids so puffy from last night's tears that it was a wonder she was able to see.

Wordlessly Hopper poured himself a cup of coffee and plucked the cup from El's hands, placing it down on the table between them.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He offered, taking a sip of coffee.

"No." El's voice came out hoarse. They sat there in silence for a few minutes. Hopper sighed and got up to get some breakfast. She snagged her coffee cup back and took a deep drink. She would need it for the day ahead.

El started a little when Hopper placed a plate of Eggos in front of her a few minutes later. Normally the sight of Eggos was enough to make her day, but not today. Not when El was certain she'd just messed up irreparably with Max and Mike.

And what about Lucas, Dustin and Will? She stared sorrowfully at the waffles. By now they must know what happened. Mike would definitely have told them. Were they just as hurt?

"Kid, I'm not going to lie. You look like shit. Do you want to stay home today?" Hopper's mouth twisted downwards into a grimace as El only half-heartedly played with the Eggos in front of her. It was rare that there wasn't a problem Eggos couldn't fix in El's world. To see her barely touching them was a huge red flag.

"No. I need to apologize to Max and Mike." El shook her head. The normally blissfully delicious waffles tasted like ashes in her mouth. She put her fork down and finally looked properly at her adoptive

father. He was clearly very worried about her and El hated that she would cause him any more trouble. But she had a feeling if she started talking about yesterday's events in detail, the tears would start all over again and then they'd both be late.

"I really hurt Max and Mike." El admitted. "I need to apologize."

"Okay. But if you need to, call me and I'll come pick you up." Hopper's offered, his brow furrowed and his face full of concern.

"Thanks Hop." And she meant it with her entire heart. Hopper was the best. She'd barely told him anything and yet he trusted her enough to call him if she really needed to. She smiled and tried to resume eating her abandoned Eggos. The rest of breakfast was pretty quiet, with El only dozing off once.

The truck ride to school was silent. El too lost in her own thoughts and Hopper giving her space. When they pulled into the parking lot she gave him a weak smile before sliding out.

"Bye Hop." El waved before shutting the door.

She could see Hopper sigh before straightening and resuming the drive to the station. El had made her choice and he wanted to respect that.

Dread coiled in her stomach as she headed into school. She avoided anyone's gaze and only had eyes for Max or Mike—searching them out in the bustling hallways. El didn't have to look for long before she spotted a familiar head of red hair by their lockers.

She approached the lockers, trying not to let her resolve sway.

"Max, can I talk to you?" El asked quietly, coming up from behind.

Max tensed, but didn't respond as she finished throwing her things into her bag. El waited patiently, every moment that passed between them grew increasingly uncomfortable until Max turned around and shouldered by her without a word.

El stood there, ignoring the whispers that flared around her and as her friend stormed away.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to will the tears that stung at her eyelids away. After several long moments it seemed to work and she resumed her morning routine as though a part of her heart didn't feel as though it had been gouged out of her chest.

Max wasn't ready to talk. This only became more apparent after first period, when the Californian didn't give a second look before departing for the next period. El didn't try to catch her. Instead, she steeled herself for her next attempt at apologizing.

The history classroom was still fairly empty when El walked in. To her surprise Mike's seat was vacant. She hesitated before heading towards her desk and setting her backpack down.

The classroom slowly filled up with her classmates, but as the clock ticked closer to the start time Mike's seat remained depressingly empty.

Did he stay home? El wondered as Ms. Hotchkiss began to clear her throat to draw the students' attention. It was at that moment that Mike slipped in to the classroom, head down. He hurriedly sat in his desk without even a glance in El's direction.

"Cutting it a little close Mr. Wheeler." Ms. Hotchkiss chastised as he fished out his supplies.

"Sorry." Mike mumbled, not looking up.

El sat frozen in her seat, watching Mike unpack his supplies. Not once did he look back towards her, and El realized he'd purposely cut it so close so he could avoid her.

Her heart sank a little more.

.

Lunchtime was a lonely affair.

El didn't dare show her face at the AV Club room and instead braved the cool November weather to sit out on their usual bench by the track. It was a hopeless thought that maybe Max would come to their bench, but it had been worth a try.

Eating lunch alone was eerily reminiscent of her first day at Hawkins High, cold and stowed away from the prying eyes of her classmates. By now everyone knew that something had occurred between Max Mayfield and El Hopper. She could see it in their curious stares and hear the barely quieted whispers that followed her to her locker. Silence was better than braving the cafeteria alone.

She spent the rest of lunch hour wondering how she could possibly fix this.

...

By Wednesday El was frustrated and sleep deprived. How could she apologize to her friends if they avoided her? Max wouldn't say a word and Mike was very good at avoiding her.

She'd tried calling Max's home numerous times, only to be told by her mom that "she isn't home right now", or "now isn't a good time" and finally, "she needs some space Eleanor. Don't call here for a while."

Phone calls to Mike's house were depressingly similar. Mrs. Wheeler seemed apologetic and slightly puzzled sounding when she would leave to get Mike but he wouldn't come to the phone.

El knew she could potentially catch her friends at the AV Club room at lunch... But the thought of facing all five of them at once made her stomach clench with nerves.

It wasn't until Thursday after school that Will and Dustin finally caught up to her.

"El? Where have you been?" Dustin's curious voice startled El and she spun around, wide-eyed. Will and Dustin both regarded El with identical looks of surprise before this morphed quickly into concern when they noticed her pale face and sleep deprived smudged eyes.

"I... um..." El's voice wouldn't come to her, but Will and Dustin waited patiently.

Why aren't they mad? Did Mike or Max not tell them what's going on?
El's mind raced with possible scenarios.

“Are you okay?” Will asked gently, his blue eyes radiating concern.

“Did Mike or Max... mention anything?” El asked awkwardly.

“We’ve barely been able to get a word out of those two all week.” Dustin frowned. “What the shit is going on between you three?” He laughed, but then promptly stopped when he saw El’s mouth twist into a grimace.

“Sorry. It’s just been a confusing week. Will you tell us what is wrong? Maybe we can help?” Dustin amended in a much gentler voice.

“Here, let’s go to the AV Club room. We can talk in privacy there.” Will offered. El’s eyes widened. Would Mike be there?

Will noticed her alarmed look because he hurriedly said, “No one will be there. They’re already gone for the day. Just us.”

Her shoulders slumped and she nodded after a long moment. While it pained her to think of Dustin and Will being angry with her too, they deserved to know directly from her. She should have talked to them right away and not left it this long as it was.

The three of them walked to the AV Club room. Dustin quickly unlocked it and flicked the lights on before they entered. Once the door was shut El began to ramble.

“It’s all my fault. Mike and Max are mad at me because of this,” she rummaged through her pack and produced the hated list. She smoothed it down and handed it to Will.

El spilled the whole story of how Mike found the list and how upset he was, quickly followed by how hurt Max was over the attempted matchmaking. Dustin and Will listened with wide eyes as all the details spilled past her lips.

“And I’m really sorry. I promise you that the last point of the list was ‘all of us become friends’. I understand if you’re upset and I just want you to know how sorry I am.”

“El.”

“I wanted you to hear it from me, but I’m sorry it wasn’t sooner I was just scared—“

“EL!” Dustin shouted, breaking through El’s rambling apology.

Her head snapped up towards Dustin and Will who looked alarmed and confused all at once.

“You don’t owe us anything. You don’t have to make anything up to us. We’re not mad. We believe you.” Dustin assured her fiercely. El stared at them in incomprehension.

“Dustin is right. This is all just a misunderstanding and everyone overreacted. I’m sure Max and Mike will come around eventually.” Will said just as firmly.

Relief crashed through El like a huge wave wiping her off her feet at the beach.

“You’re not angry?” She asked in disbelief. Will and Dustin shook their heads.

“You’re cool El. Even though your list may come off a little strange to someone who didn’t know you... you’re a good friend.” Dustin looked a little embarrassed, but his words were sincere and El couldn’t stop herself from throwing her arms around the two boys. She nearly took all three of them down but she was just so relieved that they weren’t mad. They laughed as they righted themselves and she felt lighter than she had in days.

El was in much better spirits as Dustin and Will biked her to the station.

Before Hawkins El had never had such good friends. Her mother had been so protective of her and as a result she’d been pretty isolated. The idea of having such good friends had always seemed so out of her reach... And yet coming to Hawkins El had found Max and now the boys.

Yes, Max and Mike were still angry with her. But El knew she couldn’t give up.

...

That night she waited with bated breath as the phone rang once. Twice. Three times.

"Hello?" It was Lucas who answered.

"Lucas, it's me, El Hopper." El began unsurely. Perhaps Max had told Lucas what transpired between them already. But she didn't hear the click of a phone being hung up and so she began rambling for the second time that day.

She blurted out every detail of what had happened and how hurt both Max and Mike were from her blunder. Lucas let her talk and El was glad because she didn't think she could have stopped anyways.

"I'm sorry to do this over the phone but I just wanted to make sure I didn't waste any more time." El finished, her heart hammering in her chest uncomfortably as she waited for Lucas to say something. *Anything.*

"I believe you El, I'm not mad." Lucas said a few moments later and she let out the breath she had been holding.

"Have you talked to Max?" The words tumbled past her lips before she could help herself. There was a deep sigh on the other end of the phone.

"Yeah, she told me about it EL." His voice lowered a little and her heart dropped.

"She was really upset about the list... But I really can't complain because I have the coolest girlfriend ever now. I think she just needs more time." Lucas explained.

El was both warmed and disappointed by his words. She was glad that Max and Lucas were still together. El had worried herself silly wondering if the Californian would also be mad at him even though Lucas had nothing to do with it. Thankfully that wasn't the case.

"Thanks Lucas." El said quietly, "I'll try apologizing to her again later."

“Bye El.” Lucas bid her goodnight before they hung up the phone.

El sighed and leaned against the wall for a long moment. Hopper was working late tonight, unexpectedly as Powell had called in sick. There was a nasty cold going around and it appeared not even the station was safe.

She mulled over Lucas’s advice. If she pushed too hard to apologize to Max, El knew her friend would only dig her heels in harder. Max was stubborn like that.

What if she doesn’t accept my apology? The thought made El’s mouth twist into an unhappy frown. Max didn’t have to accept her apology—not if she didn’t want to. El swallowed the lump in her throat. That was not a possibility she wanted to think about right now.

As for Mike... El was terrified. She could try to apologize to him. Not that he had to accept it either, but he’d looked so heartbroken it was devastating. And how could she apologize to him when she couldn’t even find him?

That night she barely slept again, the thought of Max and Mike laughing at her apology poisoned her dreams.

...

Friday arrived bright and early.

It was a cold day, and Hopper finally gave up and grabbed his heavier jacket out of the closet, prompting El to do the same. The weather had been growing steadily colder for this time of the year and thus far they had held off from digging out their winter coats. But it seemed they’d held off as long as they possibly could.

Sleep was a luxury El just didn’t get to have this week—evidence of her horrible night’s sleep was clear that morning when she accidentally dozed off on the truck ride to school.

“Kid.” Hopper shook her shoulder gently. El blinked wearily, trying to clear the heaviness from her eyelids as she looked around the truck curiously. “We’re here.”

El sat up stiffly, her neck kinked from the awkward angle she'd passed out in and glanced out the window of the truck. Sure enough, they were outside Hawkins High.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and ignored the unspoken offer about going back home that seemed to radiate from Hopper. As tempting as it was El knew she couldn't hide in the cabin.

"Have a good day Hop." El mustered a smile. Hopper frowned but nodded anyways.

"You too kid." He said gruffly.

El slid out of the truck and shut the door firmly.

She fell asleep in each of her classes at least twice.

When she was this sleep deprived trying to pay attention was a waste of time, but she was determined to make it until the end of this hell week. After that, she had the entire weekend to rest and try to make things better.

El lingered in class a little longer than necessary, giving time for Max to grab her stuff from her locker and split before she made it there. Part of her hoped that Max would stick around and she'd be waiting with a grin on her face, her backpack stuffed with her overnight gear waiting for El so they could both go home.

But of course when El eventually meandered to her locker Max was long gone. The halls were emptying rapidly around her as she opened her locker and switched out the books that she would need for the weekend, trying not to feel too sad about the absence of her best friend.

"Hopper, you got a minute?" The voice took El completely off guard. She spun around on her heel, surprised to see Coach Kline standing behind her.

"Hi coach," she greeted, getting over her momentary surprise, "sure. What's up?" El tried to ignore the way Coach Kline's gaze suddenly turned concerned when he caught sight of the bags under her eyes.

"I just wanted to see how you were feeling about tomorrow's race.

Have you been sleeping enough this week?" Coach Kline's asked tentatively.

Shit. El tried not to visibly flinch under her coach's scrutinizing gaze. She had completely forgotten about her race tomorrow! It was the last cross-country race of the season. The Tiger Classic! El had been so preoccupied with her friends that the race had totally slipped her mind.

"Yeah! I'm ready for tomorrow Coach." El tried to smile, but it came out as more of a grimace. Coach Kline's concerned gaze turned into a frown as he studied her.

"Are you coming down with something Hopper? There's a cold that's been going around lately..."

"No! I just didn't sleep well last night." *Or the last four.* El smiled a little more convincingly. "I'll be right as rain for tomorrow with a good night's sleep." She assured him. There was a long moment as Coach Kline mulled it over.

"Try some chamomile tea before bed, Hopper. That always helps me when I can't sleep." Coach Kline clapped a friendly hand on her shoulder with a nod before heading down the hall. She watched him go with a relieved sigh.

I can't believe I forgot about my race tomorrow, El scolded herself. Of all the things going wrong in her life right now, she could *really* use a good run.

"El! You have a race tomorrow?" El was startled for the second time within a few short minutes when Will called to her unexpectedly.

"Sorry," he apologized as he and Dustin approached, "we couldn't help but overhear."

El smiled and nodded as convincingly as she could.

"Yes. It's the Tiger Classic. It's my last race of the season." She explained. *And I completely forgot about it until right now.*

"Can we come watch?" Dustin asked hopefully. El turned to the two

of them, her eyes wide.

“I’d really like that.” She was touched that the two boys wanted to come. Even if they were the only two who came... it meant the world to her.

“Nine again?” Will asked.

“No, this one starts at three. It’s a 10 kilometre run and it’s supposed to be chilly so make sure you wear a jacket.” She explained as they made their way out of the front doors. Most of their classmates had taken off already, there were only a few people loitering in the parking lot and Hopper was one of them.

Dustin and Will walked El to the truck, each of the boys bid Hopper a polite hello.

“We’ll see you tomorrow.” Will assured her with a bright smile.

Something caught her eye over Will’s shoulder. She could see a mop of dark curly hair by the bike rack—it was Mike. Her heart dropped in to her stomach, this was the first time all week she’d seen Mike outside of class. He might have been waiting for Will and Dustin, but it was clear the way his back was to them that he didn’t want to see *her*.

Will followed El’s gaze curiously, sighing when he caught sight of their friend.

“He’ll come to his senses El.” Will patted her shoulder comfortingly.

“Or else.” Dustin agreed with an impatient glare in Mike’s direction. El smiled weakly and slid into the truck.

“Thanks guys.” She said sincerely.

They waved as she shut the door of the truck and Hopper pulled out of the parking lot.

El settled down into her seat, ignoring Hopper’s worried gaze that bore into her.

"I'm working late tonight." Hopper said after a few minutes of silence.

"I know." El sighed. "I've got my soaps to keep me company. It's supposed to be a new episode tonight, so I'll be fine."

The words sounded empty to her own ears and Hopper frowned a little, but didn't press her more. She knew he was trying to avoid talking about the elephant in the room—or more to the point, the lack of Max in the truck for their Friday night sleepover.

The rest of the ride home was quiet; when Hop pulled over he stopped the truck and turned in his seat to look at his adoptive daughter properly.

"Do you want me to lock your friends in a cell until they're ready to accept your apology?" He asked jokingly. El snorted, rolling her eyes at Hopper's lame attempt at making her feel better (not that she didn't appreciate it).

"No, but I'll keep that in mind. Thank you."

Hopper sighed and nodded, scratching his beard for a moment in thought.

"I was never too good with people, kid. I'm still not." She wasn't sure where Hopper was going with this, but she waited patiently for him to continue. "I was worried you wouldn't make friends here... but I'm glad I was wrong. Everyone makes mistakes, but your friends are good kids. You're a good kid. They'll come around soon." He gave her a gruff smile and tousled her hair affectionately.

El didn't trust her voice right now to say anything, and instead she leaned forward for a hug.

"Don't tell them I said they're good kids or I'll never be able to get rid of them." Hopper grumbled, wrapping his arms around her. She chuckled thickly into his jacket, revelling in the comfort of his hug and the familiar smell of cigarettes that clung to him.

"I promise." El agreed.

They bid goodbye for the evening and El headed into the forest towards Hopper Cabin. The warmth of the wood stove wrapped comfortingly around her when she entered the front door. She dropped her bag by the entrance and slung her coat haphazardly onto the coat rack. El quickly fell into her familiar routine, flicking on the TV to her favourite channel and going to check the fire.

For a while she passed the time by watching TV, but her heart wasn't into her favourite soap operas. Around dinnertime she grabbed some leftovers from the fridge and ate them in the quiet of the cabin. Ever since El joined the track team and the cross-country team, Hopper had been making an effort to learn how to cook. Most times it was a fairly simple dinner that the two of them managed to concoct (as neither of them were gifted in the kitchen), but it certainly beat microwavable dinners every night.

It was about seven-thirty when El found herself lingering by the phone in the kitchen. Her hand hovered over the receiver nervously. She'd tried for the last four days to call Mike, but refused to talk to her each time. She took a deep breath and picked up the phone. The Wheeler's number was an automatic motion now and El waited with bated breath as the phone rang once...twice...

"Wheeler residence, Holly speaking."

The young voice made El pause in surprise, disappointment sunk into her chest when once again when she realized it was not Mike. But this was Holly! His little sister if she remembered correctly. El was a little relieved it wasn't Mrs. Wheeler who answered the phone again since she had called each evening and she wouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Wheeler told her to buzz off soon.

"H-Hi, Holly, this is El Hopper." El stammered a little belatedly. Luckily Holly hadn't hung up on her yet. "Is Mike available?"

Silence.

And then: *"a girl? You're asking to talk to Mike?"* Holly asked incredulously. El couldn't help but smile a little at the the young girl's disbelief.

“Yes. I’m a girl and I was hoping to talk to Mike.”

“*Why?*”

The question is said with such harsh sincerity that only kids seem capable of that this time El did laugh. She decided to be honest.

“I need to apologize to him.” El explained, twisting the phone cord around her finger nervously.

“*Oh. Okay. I’ll go find him.*” Holly seemed to find that answer acceptable. There was a clunk followed by silence. El didn’t hear the beeping to indicate no one was on the other line, so she waited patiently.

After a long minute El could hear some muffled words that didn’t sound at all happy. The speaker seemed to come closer to the phone and El froze at the voice she’d wanted to hear all week. It was Mike! But it sounded like he and Holly were arguing.

“*I said no, Holly!*” There was a loud noise and then nothing. El waited nervously as someone picked up the phone again.

“*Sorry El Hopper. That jerk doesn’t want to come to the phone right now. I can try to get him to call you later?*” Holly offered, sounding genuinely puzzled that her brother didn’t want to talk to the girl on the phone.

Her shoulder’s slumped and El tried to blink away the sudden tears that pricked at her eyes. Even though she’d been turned down all week... somehow it didn’t get any easier.

“Thanks for the offer Holly, but it’s okay. Have a good night.” El sighed.

“Bye.” The youngest Wheeler hung up.

She headed back into the living room and sank down onto the couch. As El watched her soap she tried to ignore the ache in her chest that her best friend wasn’t here to complain about it.

...

When El woke up on Saturday morning something was off.

Her limbs felt as though she was trying to wade through syrup and her head pounded against her skull. It had been yet another horrible, restless night of sleep but El knew she had to get up and have a proper breakfast for her run later that day. Too many nights of little to no sleep had caught up to her—but she refused to let that stop her.

Coach was counting on her. Not only that, but Will and Dustin were coming to watch! Above all, maybe a good, hard run would clear her mind a little.

Hopper didn't stir until just after lunchtime, looking like a zombie on his feet. El watched him wordlessly move from his bedroom to the bathroom. She put on a pot of coffee, adding a couple extra scoops that Hopper looked like he needed.

About fifteen minutes later a freshly showered Hopper emerged from the bathroom, looking a little scruffy but otherwise much more awake. He helped himself to a cup of coffee and sat down at the table.

"Morning." He greeted, placing his cup down on the table and reached for the paper.

"Morning." El parroted with a nod, briefly looking up from the homework piled on the table in front of her. She hadn't wanted to wake Hopper and used the morning to work on the homework that had piled up over the week.

"Are you feeling okay?" El looked up at Hopper, confused.

Sure, the last week's horrible sleeps had really caught up with her, but El didn't think she looked *that* bad.

"I'm feeling fine." She lied breezily, carefully not making eye contact.

"You don't look fine." He sighed and shifted in his chair. "Are you sure you want to run today?" He gestured to her outfit. El glanced down at her track shirt and pants; the Hawkins High tiger mascot on her shirt seemed to stare at her accusingly.

“Yes.” El said firmly, leaving no room in her tone for argument. She knew it was foolish to think, but Max had always come to watch her races when they were on home turf. She couldn’t squash the hope in her chest that maybe Max would show up with Will, Dustin, Lucas and even Mike.

She met her adoptive father’s gaze steadily until he sighed deeply and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Alright.” Hopper relented, taking a sip of coffee and picking up the paper in defeat.

El smiled a little at his concern. It was nice to have someone to worry about you, much in the same way she worried about Hop when he worked too hard. Clearly he was worried about her, so she decided to throw him a bone.

“After the race we can go to Benny’s for waffles. And then I’ll come home and sleep.” El offered, hoping Hopper would take the compromise. He peered at her over his paper, taking in her too-pale skin and dark circles under her eyes.

“Sounds like a plan.” Hopper agreed finally. It was not like he could force El to stay home. She’d run all the way to the course and then run the race just to spite him if he pushed her too hard. So he took the offered compromise.

The both shared a small smile and resumed their activities at the table.

.

About an hour and a half later El and Hopper pulled into the parking lot by the nature trail off of the highway. She’d almost nodded off on the ride there, but had caught her head lolling on her shoulder. If Hopper noticed he didn’t say anything, but his mouth seemed permanently set into an unhappy line.

There were already about ten or so vehicles in the parking lot and El tried her best not to scan for any familiar looking bikes.

The pre-race jitters seeped full force into her bones and she reveled in

the familiar feeling. It was nice to have something else to focus on right now.

Hopper slid out of the truck first and El followed after taking a deep breath. She had to focus on the race ahead. That became hard however when El was immediately ambushed by Will and Dustin.

“There you are!” Dustin exclaimed excitedly. El didn’t recognize him at first because he was cocooned in a fluffy white blanket from the cold, his curly hair sticking out the front. The way he was bundled up, he rather resembled E.T.

“Hey El!” Will greeted shortly after, catching up to Dustin.

“You’re here early!” El was so happy to see them; she couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her lips.

“We learned from last time. We wanted to be able to wish you good luck before your race. My mom gave us a ride and she wanted to stick around, I hope you don’t mind.” Will explained, motioning to the right where Hopper and Joyce were currently talking.

“Not at all.” El said happily.

“Lucas is coming in a little while. He was just stopped at Max’s to uh...” Dustin trailed off when Will shot him a stern look. “Never mind. Point is he’ll be here later.”

El nodded, trying to push the rush of sadness at the confirmation that Max wasn’t here out of her mind. She had a feeling that Lucas had tried to go and convince Max to come, but to no luck.

“Are you feeling okay El?” Will asked suddenly, blue eyes intently studying her face. El cursed mentally, did she really look that bad? First Hopper, then Coach Kline and now Will?

“I’m fine.” El said cheerily, “I have to go start checking in for the race. I’ll be right back.” She made her getaway abruptly, immediately feeling bad for doing so but she was stubborn.

El offered a friendly wave to Joyce as she caught her eye, but headed towards the registration table by the start line. Everyone was bundled up similarly to Dustin, sporting blankets or jackets. Some clung to the

warmth of a thermos or each other. It was a cold November afternoon; ominous dark grey clouds hovered on the horizon. El wouldn't be surprised if it started to snow later, though she hoped she would be done running before then.

"El Hopper." El stated once she had bid the volunteer good morning. The volunteer nodded and looked down at her list.

"Ah, there you are. Here's your bib. Goodluck out there." The volunteer held out the small plastic bag with the bib number and the safety pins. She thanked the volunteer and headed back towards where Hopper, Joyce, Will and Dustin were clustered.

El looked down at the bag and frowned a little when she saw her number.

011 stared back at her in a huge, square font. It must have been someone's idea of a joke to give her the same number as her nickname.

"Hey El, are you ready for your race?" Joyce greeted when El reached the edge of the cluster. She could see Joyce's eyes sweep across her tired face and a slight frown formed between across her brow. El tried to look as healthy as she possibly could and gave Joyce a beaming smile.

"As ready as I can be. Thank you for staying to watch Mrs. Byers." El said sincerely.

"Of course!" Joyce returned the smile and nodded.

El looked back down at her bib packet and began to open it, but she noticed the worried looks Hopper and Joyce exchanged.

She began unclipping the safety pins and fixing them on the hole-punched corners of the bib. Once that was done, she stared down at her number, trying to ignore the pang of sadness in her chest.

Max always helped me with the back. El sighed.

"Need a hand?" Will asked gently.

“That would be great.” El accepted the offer gratefully. She shrugged off her jacket so that Will could reach the back of her shirt.

El focused on pinning the front. Her hand slipped a few times and she ended up pinning her shirt strangely. Weird... it was almost as though she were seeing double. She shook her head.

I’m just tired. El assured herself. The pin was so small after all, and it was an awkward angle even from the front.

“Here, let me help too.” Dustin offered, uncocooning his arms for a moment to give her assistance. El stood as still as she could while her two friends helped her.

“Thank you.” She said gratefully once more when they finished. The group glanced over as Coach Kline spoke into his trusty bullhorn, calling the spectators, runners and volunteers to attention.

“Thank you all for joining us here today. I would like to thank our out of town guests for making the drive; we appreciate your attending the Tiger Classic—the last cross-country race for our district. Runners, please make your way to the starting line.”

“Go get em’ El!” Dustin bid her good luck with a huge grin. He was once again happily cocooned in his blanket.

“You’ll do great.” Will rested a hand on her shoulder in a friendly manner, giving her a broad smile as well. El returned their smiles gratefully, before Joyce wrapped her up in a surprise hug.

“Good luck out there.” Joyce said kindly.

“Have a good run, kid.” Hopper tousled her hair with a smirk, though she could see the worry reflected in his eyes still.

“Thanks everyone.” El nodded, touched that she had a small crowd here just to support her. With one last look at her mini cheer squad; she headed towards the starting line.

“Hi Coach.” El greeted once she was close enough to Coach Kline.

“Hey Hopper.” He glanced up from his clipboard and promptly did a

double take. "Whoa, are you sure you're up to running today? There's no harm in sitting this one out." Coach Kline regarded El seriously. Several of the runners glanced over at her in curiosity. She shifted uncomfortably on her feet, glancing over where Hopper, Joyce, Dustin and Will waited for her.

"I want to run." El assured him.

Coach Kline frowned a little and looked as though he had hoped for a different answer, but he nodded after a moment.

"Okay Hopper. Have a good run."

The starting line was a little more crowded today. Not only were there the cross-country runners from Hawkin's High, but a few neighbouring town high schools had sent their runners as well. She recognized a few of them from other races and exchanged a few friendly nods with a couple of them before they all focused on the starting line.

"Runners at the ready." Coach Kline called into his bullhorn.

El shook out her limbs, focusing on the pre-race jitters as much as she could. After a few moments of shuffling, there was the customary pause as the runners took a deep breath and everything seemed to still.

The starting pistol fired and El was off!

She pulled ahead of the group and began putting distance in between herself and the other runners. The sound of the group's feet pounding against the dirt began to fade as El raced forwards. She didn't dare look back and instead embraced the familiar feeling of running.

Running was a method of meditation for El. Yes, she used her emotions often to power her run, but the frustration of those emotions would slip away and leave her with the exhilaration of her run. Normally she lost herself in the familiar rhythm of her feet hitting the dirt, the swing of her arms and the sound of her blood pounding in her ears. But today she was struggling to focus on putting one foot in front of the other. She was running. But it wasn't

a good run. It didn't make her feel as though she were flying... this run felt like she were trying not to drown.

She needed to focus on the burning in her lungs and not the fact that her best friend was still upset at her and she wasn't sure what else she could do to fix it.

She needed to focus on evening her breathing and not that Mike was still mad at her too. And maybe there was nothing she could do to fix that, either.

She needed to focus on pacing herself—but was doing a shit job as she tried to outrun her own emotions.

What else could she do?

El thought of Will and Dustin and Lucas as she rounded a corner, putting even more distance between her and the rest of the pack. She didn't want to divide the Party by causing unnecessary strain on their friendship. But El had had so few friends in her life... the thought of giving them up made her feel as though she couldn't breathe.

About half an hour into her run the edge of the quarry came into view and El ran the marked path beside it. Her world swam as she blinked away unhappy tears, trying to focus on her run instead of her worries. But it became increasingly hard when the world was spinning.

She stumbled.

El was far too close to the edge of the quarry—she didn't have time to react before she was falling.

Pain.

And then: nothing.

9. Hazy Shades of Winter

School was absolutely miserable the following week after Mike's discovery of El's list. He would have happily barricaded himself in his room so he wouldn't have to deal with anything for the rest of the week—but of course his mom would never entertain the idea of him missing school when he wasn't sick.

Mike had almost been late for American History. He didn't want to chance a run-in with El first thing Monday morning and he'd hidden in the hallway until Ms. Hotchkiss was just about to start class. He'd felt El's eyes on him, but he'd ignored her.

Monday at lunchtime he was relieved when she didn't come for lunch at the AV Club. He'd shot out of their shared second period class the moment the bell rang. It had earned him a fierce glare from Ms. Hotchkiss, but it was better than dealing with the hurt that tore through his chest every time she glanced at him with her piercing brown eyes.

"Hey, where's El?" Dustin asked curiously at approximately twenty after twelve. He glanced around the AV Club as if El were hiding behind a shelf, waiting to jump out and surprise them. Normally if the two girls made an appearance it would have been before now. Will also looked slightly concerned. Lucas had begged out of their usual lunchtime meeting today. He'd said something was seriously bothering Max and that he was going to go see if he could cheer her up at lunch. Something was going on, Dustin and Will's bullshit senses were tingling at the seemingly deliberate absence of the two girls.

Mike was forced to make a decision. Did he tell Will and Dustin about El's betrayal? Or did he let her talk to them herself?

"Mike? Do you know where El is?" Will asked after he didn't say anything. Will eyed the bags under Mike's eyes and the tired slump of his posture suspiciously. In that moment he concluded that he really didn't feel like talking to Dustin and Will about it. The wound was still so raw.

“No.” He said with a shrug. It wasn’t *exactly* a lie. Mike didn’t know where El was.

Will and Dustin exchanged a strange look, but Will didn’t press it any more, which he was glad for.

It was as though someone had gouged out a part of his heart and that was hard enough to deal with right now.

How would they take El’s list? Maybe it was good that they didn’t know for now. He didn’t want his friends to be as hurt as he was, so maybe if he could deal with his own heartbreak before they learned about it, he could be a listening ear and someone to lean on.

Once Mike got a firm handle on his own emotions he could tell Dustin, Lucas and Will.

...

“Michael, the phone is for you.” His mother poked her head into his bedroom. Mike glanced up from his homework in surprise and glanced at the time. It was nearly eight on Monday evening. His walkie-talkie had been silent tonight and it was very rare that one of the guys would call the house phone.

“It’s a girl.” Karen added upon seeing his confused look. She sounded excited about the fact that a girl was calling her son. Visions of future marriage and grand children were already dancing across her daydreams.

Mike stood halfway and was about to follow his mom when something occurred to him: there was only one girl who would likely be calling him and he definitely didn’t want to talk to her right now. He scowled and sat back down firmly into his seat much to his mom’s surprise.

“I’m busy with my homework.” Mike said stubbornly. “I can’t come to the phone right now.”

Karen gave him a measured look. “You can’t come or you won’t come to the phone?”

He glanced away sullenly, refusing to answer. His silence was answer enough for Karen and she sighed.

"I'll tell her you're not available." She pulled his bedroom door shut with a soft click, her footsteps fading down the stairs.

Mike sat there for a long moment, staring unseeingly at the homework in front of him. He knew he was being childish. But he wasn't ready to talk to El and he wasn't sure if he could ever forgive her. He tried to turn his attention back to his homework and ignore the sad, bitter feeling in the pit of his stomach.

That night Mike had a strange dream.

He was listening for El on the walkie-talkie; over and over he called out to her. It felt like years in his dream that he was huddled over, calling desperately for El to give him any indication that she was there. That she was alive.

"Please." He'd pleaded in the dream until his voice was hoarse.

El never answered.

...

By Wednesday it became very clear that something had blown up between Max Mayfield and El Hopper. The two friends who were always seen together were the subject of whispers and rumours circulating around Hawkins High and even Mike caught snippets of them.

Neither of the girls came to the AV Club for lunch on Tuesday and when Max showed up with Lucas but without El on Wednesday it became very apparent that whatever happened between them was still unresolved.

Did they have a fight? What about? Mike wondered. He knew better than to ask Max—because he liked his head quite firmly attached to his neck. She looked about as good as Mike did, except she lashed out more. Her usual harmless sarcasm and teasing had a distinct sharpness to it and it was setting everyone on an uncomfortable edge.

Dustin and Will knew something was going on too—and though they attempted to bring it up politely, neither Max nor Mike felt like budging.

The entire week had been sleepless and miserable. He didn't know how to move forward and he did what Mike was good at doing: avoiding the issue by avoiding El.

But dammit... as mad as he was he couldn't stop thinking about her. Mike was still really hurt, yes... but he missed her. He missed her smile, the way her gaze softened or when her face lit up, or that low, husky chuckle that made his spine curl.

El had called each evening since Monday. Every time his mom brought him the phone and asked if he wanted to talk to her, he refused.

What could he even say?

In English he noticed El's exhausted state. She was just as sleep deprived looking as he was—her eyes smudged with dark circles, her face pale.

She looked lost. Mike was too.

...

Mike breathed a sigh of relief when the final bell for Friday's class rang. He joined the swarm of students flooding the halls and gathered his books hastily from his locker.

The air was crisp as he burst out the front doors of Hawkins High, ignoring the excited chatter of his classmates and making a beeline for the bike rack. The weekend was finally here and it could not have come soon enough. Mike couldn't take another day of avoiding El.

Will I have to live the rest of high school on the run? He wondered.

His thoughts briefly flitted to the comfortable Saturday mornings he'd come to know at the arcade with everyone and he tried to imagine those mornings with everyone except El. All six of them crowding around a single arcade game like sardines, yelling encouragement,

taunting, heckling... El's smile. Her game face. The incredible way she hammered on the drop claw button with an absurd amount of confidence. The way she took his hand so carefully, her cheeks flushed and her gaze shy. Their hands entwined...

The memories that were so colorful and alive in his thoughts suddenly seemed gray at the thought of El not being there in the morning. Like the colors just didn't exist anymore.

It wasn't fair. Mike had been perfectly happy with Will, Lucas and Dustin before El had come into their lives.

What was different now? Why did he feel like he couldn't go back to just the four of them? Max and El's inclusion now seemed like something natural and to cut even one of them out would be like cutting off a vital part of them.

It wasn't fair.

Out of the corner of his eye Mike spotted El coming out the front door with Dustin and Will. Immediately he turned away, trying to make himself scarce. He busied himself with his backpack until he could hear the sound of people approaching. When he turned around, he was glad to see it was just Will and Dustin.

But Will and Dustin didn't look so glad to see him. Both of his friends eyed him critically.

"What?" Mike asked irritably, confused by their strange looks.

"Alright Mike. Let's cut the bullshit out. When are you going to talk to El?" Dustin demanded, his tone just as irritated. Mike wasn't expecting that.

"What? Did El put you up to this?" He regretted the words almost as soon as he said them. He knew El wouldn't ask anything like that, not when she'd been trying hard all week to get ahold of him. Will and Dustin's expressions darkened and Mike suddenly got the sense that he was about to get a good dressing down. He certainly was not wrong.

"No. We're just tired of you wasting time and moping around all

week!" Will snapped, blue eyes flashing dangerously. "We've tried to be patient Mike. But whatever weirdness going on between you and El needs to stop. You're supposed to be friends."

Anger thrummed under Mike's skin and all the frustration, all the sadness, all the hurt just seemed to burst inside of him.

"Try telling that to El! She's supposed to be our friend but she just used us." Mike said bitterly. His declaration was met by an eerie silence and he looked away from both Dustin and Will.

"Did you even bother to listen to her Mike?" Dustin demanded angrily, his hands curled into fists at his side. "Do you really think El would do that to us? Really?" He pressed, his cheeks flushed in anger. Mike's head whipped back around to face his two friends.

Why didn't they understand? Was he not explaining himself well enough?

"You didn't see the list Will! She just used us so she could get Max to Lucas." Mike tried again. Why was his own argument sounding so flimsy to his ears?

"You're wrong Mike." Will's strong voice made him hesitate for the first time since the incident.

"What?"

"You're wrong." Will punctuated his statement with a sharp jab to Mike's chest. "El showed us the list because she wanted to be honest. She apologized until I thought she was going to pass out. I know her list comes across wrong, but the friendship has been real! She told Dustin and I that her third point was that all of us become friends. And I believe her." Will didn't normally get so worked up. Out of the four boys he was the slowest to anger, and to see the anger simmering beneath his skin like a wave about to crest was unnerving.

"So do I." Dustin agreed just as firmly. "El and Max are cool! So what if they kind of infiltrated our party or whatever? I know I didn't like it at first but now I'm glad they did! You're full of shit if you think El would purposely hurt us."

Mike was shocked that he was outnumbered.

He had been sure—so *sure* that El had betrayed them. That she'd betrayed *him*. Humiliation had seared him when he'd found that list and he'd been numb to anything else. He'd thought El had proven him right, that a girl like her wanting to be friends with him, and possibly feeling more than just that had been too good to be true. And in his haste to prove that to himself (and his self-doubt) right he had shut El down.

He thought back to how desperately she had tried to explain.

"Mike," she'd pleaded, her voice cracking as she tried to get him just to look at her—to just listen. Instead Mike had only replied: *"what is wrong with you?"*

El had released his arm as though he had burned her. He could see the depth of hurt in her tear stained eyes, but he'd ignored it—so sure of her betrayal, so sure that he'd been right—it was too good to be true.

Dustin and Will's words ate at his righteous anger until Mike was only left with the simmering shame of his own actions.

What is wrong with you? Instead of talking it out like a mature person—no—a true friend, Mike had acted like the biggest fucking jerk in the world.

El had tried to explain herself. El had tried to apologize to him all week. El was a true, good friend. And what had he done?

Shut her down at every opportunity. Hidden from her. Refused her phone calls. He'd been so eager to be proven wrong—that someone as amazing as El Hopper couldn't possibly like him—Mike "the nerd" Wheeler, but he was wrong.

In a daze, he wordlessly wandered away from Will and Dustin.

"Should we go after him?" Dustin asked, concerned.

"He needs time to think about what a wastoid he's been. They'll all come around." Will advised.

"Thank god we're the logical ones." Dustin sighed a long suffering sigh.

...

Mike lay awake all Friday night. He couldn't have slept even if someone shot him with a horse tranquilizer—too consumed by his thoughts.

He'd moved on autopilot after being reamed out by Dustin and Will. Coming home and hardly said a word to his family before lumbering up the stairs, their argument still so fresh in his mind.

Mike was a logical person.

He was so sure he'd been right to be angry at El—but he hadn't even let her defend herself. He was so sure he was right! That she couldn't have been genuine in her friendship... or anything else. After all, El was beautiful and cool and so incredible! How could a girl like her possibly be interested in someone like him? Mike Wheeler: nerd extraordinaire? Co-winner of the Hawkins Middle School Science Fair (for three years) and Hawkins High School Science Fair? And most depressingly, Mike Wheeler, total wastoid friend?

He buried his face in his arms as he lay on his stomach, trying not to think about how much he'd hurt her. And he knew he'd hurt her a lot, if the look in her eyes when he'd snapped at her were anything to go by.

I overreacted. Mike concluded, though his conclusion didn't make him feel any better.

I owe El a HUGE apology. That thought didn't make him feel any better either.

Just because he apologized didn't mean she had to accept it. He'd seen how miserable she looked all week! And like the coward he was he'd avoided her. How could she want to apologize to him still even though he'd been such a jerk all week? If anything he should be the one on his knees apologizing to her—not the other way around!

Mike groaned miserably into his pillow, before an idea struck him.

El was racing tomorrow! He could go and apologize and... totally interrupt her sport by being selfish and wanting to apologize at an inconvenient time.

He couldn't do that to her. Mike knew how much El loved running. Besides, would she even want him there after he'd been such a huge jerk?

I can't show my face at her race tomorrow. Mike thought sadly, tossing and turning once again as he lay there.

Mike could understand if El never forgave him, he wasn't so sure he could forgive himself either. He was completely mortified about how he'd overreacted.

He had been so close to telling El how he felt about her and so confident that she returned those feelings at least a little—but now what could he do?

I can apologize, Mike reaffirmed to himself. It was a daunting start, but it was all he could do right now and hope that El could forgive him eventually. He would try to apologize on Sunday.

Mike lay awake for a long time after that.

...

Mike glanced at the clock on his nightstand for what seemed like the millionth time that day. He'd been holed up in his room the entirety of Saturday morning and time was just crawling by.

El's race started at three. Briefly he entertained the thought of going to see El off on her race, or go to watch... but he was too nervous and ashamed to work up the nerve. And so, instead, Mike made a half-hearted effort at doing his homework for the weekend. He tried not to focus on the clock ticking ever closer to three... and then past three as he worked, barely surfacing from his room all day.

It was close to five o' clock when Mike's walkie-talkie went off in his nightstand drawer. He frowned, not quite able to make out the muffled words. He didn't really feel like talking to any of his friends right now anyways, content to wallow in his own pity party until

tomorrow.

However whoever was on the walkie-talkie wasn't giving up and seemed to grow increasingly louder and more urgent. Finally, Mike rose from his chair with an annoyed grunt and ripped the drawer open.

"CODE RED. MIKE. CODE RED. LUCAS. RESPOND. OVER." It was Dustin! Calling for a code red?

Mike reached for his walkie-talkie and was about to press the button down to reply when he remembered that Dustin had one time used their "Code Red" alert when he ran out of chips. The rest of the Party had been so angry with him that Dustin had never abused their Code Red alert again... but still, Mike hesitated.

"Dustin, it's Lucas. What's wrong? Over." Lucas's concerned voice crackled over the radio.

"Finally!" Dustin shouted, *"Lucas, you need to get down here to the nature trail."* Mike listened with a growing sense of dread. Why would they need to get down to the nature trail? Unless...

"What happened?" Lucas asked, his voice had an edge to it now. Dustin let out a stream of curses and said something that wasn't quite understandable.

"Dustin!" Lucas responded again, his voice irritated and worried.

"Lucas. It's Will here. Get down to the nature trail. All the runners returned shortly after four except for El. Hopper's organizing a search party now... El is missing."

Mike dropped the walkie-talkie, it clattered loudly to his bedroom floor. He could hear Lucas confirm that he and Max were on their way, but it sounded like he was under water, blood rushed in his eardrums.

El was... missing?

His limbs wouldn't respond to his brain and Mike stood there for a long moment until there was a commotion downstairs. The sound of

the commotion rebooted his brain and Mike quickly snatched the walkie-talkie off the floor, grabbed his jacket and ripped his door open, racing down the stairs.

“Young lady! I don’t even—Lucas?” Karen Wheeler shouted and Mike nearly collided with Max at the bottom of the kitchen stairs. Her eyes were wide and she looked as frantic as he probably looked. Lucas was standing at the kitchen door next to a very confused Mrs. Wheeler.

“Wheeler! Come on!” Max shouted, turning on her heel and racing out of the kitchen. He didn’t need to be told twice.

“Mike! What in the world is going on?” Karen demanded.

“El is missing.” Mike said shortly, the words felt strange in his mouth. “I’ll be back later mom. I’ll be with the Chief of Police so don’t worry.” And then he raced past his startled mom without another word.

Lucas and Max clambered onto Lucas’s bike and pushed off when he burst outside, only pausing to finish putting his sneakers on. Mike grabbed his bike and hopped on, pedalling madly after Lucas and Max.

He focused on pedalling hard and tried not to be overwhelmed by the lurching worry that burrowed deep in his mind. Was El okay? Was she hurt? Why hadn’t she returned from her run?

Clearly Hopper was worried enough to form a search party and not knowing what was going on was driving him mad. The three of them biked in silence towards the nature trail, the only sounds were his and Lucas’s laboured breaths.

Not for the first time his life Mike wished he had a driver’s license. Then they would have been there by now.

When the nature trail came into view his heart sank in his chest. There were several police cruisers and Hopper’s old truck parked in the lot, their lights flashing. The parking lot was fairly full and was a hive of activity as they dropped their bikes on the grass and ran towards the cruisers.

Mike spotted Hopper; he was wearing a bright orange vest and was standing next to another officer. The three of them made a beeline once they also spotted Will and Dustin close to the Chief of Police.

“Finally!” Dustin exclaimed, before turning to glare at Mike. “Why didn’t you answer the Code Red?” He snapped angrily.

“What happened? Where’s El?” Mike ignored Dustin’s anger and looked to Will for answers.

“All the other runners came back just after four. At first we thought she just didn’t place first... but then El never came back.” Will explained quickly. “We waited a little while and then some of the runners volunteered to run back through the course to look for her. They had no luck.”

“What are we waiting for then?” Max demanded, looking as though she would run the course herself as many times as it would take.

“Hopper called for a search party. We’re just waiting for the materials so that no one else gets lost.” Dustin took over this time with a worried glance towards the forest.

“So all we can do is wait?” Lucas asked, reaching out to grip Max’s shoulders tightly so she wouldn’t barge into the forest all on her own.

“It shouldn’t be much longer now. Powell left a while ago to get the supplies.” Will nodded.

Sure enough, the sound of a police cruiser in the distance wailed closer and closer. It came racing into view, lights blaring and skid to an abrupt stop on the highway. Officer Powell climbed out of the cruiser and immediately opened the trunk. Hopper and Joyce were quick to move to help retrieve supplies.

A group of about twenty-five people remained behind, waiting for their orange vest, whistle and flashlights to be distributed, they volunteered to stay back and help search for the missing runner. A mix of spectators, volunteers from the race and runners remained. Mike recognized Coach Kline and a few of the Hawkins’ runners from the last race among the group.

Hopper headed towards them with supplies tucked under his arms after a few minutes. He held out an orange vest abruptly to Mike, hardly sparing him a second glance.

It was already getting darker. Mid November meant that the night came much too quickly—and they were burning daylight.

Mike accepted his items robotically, his arms felt like lead as he put the vest on.

“Thanks for coming kid.” Hopper’s face was drawn and tired as he addressed Max.

“Anything for El, Chief.” Max whispered, trying to smile, but it came out as a tight grimace instead. Hopper nodded at the boys before moving on to finish handing the items out.

“Okay we’re breaking up into five groups of six.” Officer Powell instructed through the bullhorn. He briefly described the search pattern they’d be taking and what actions they were to take in the event they found something.

Mike tried to listen as best he could, but this whole thing felt surreal. El could be hurt, or kidnapped or worse! And they were wasting time.

Dustin, Will, Lucas, Max and Mike of course opted to be a group. It was a good thing that Dustin, Will and Lucas were paying attention to the briefing because Mike and Max were far too busy gazing off into the forest as though they would be able to see El from here.

Mike swallowed his panic down and he could see the same process happening with his friends. Losing their cool now wouldn’t help El. Keeping calm and helping with the search party was the only thing they could do.

The sun crept towards the tree line as they were finally released into the forest.

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The silence of the forest was broken only by the sounds of the calls

from the volunteers who shouted El's name.

They walked slowly and deliberately, combing every inch of the ground in an attempt to catch a clue to where their friend disappeared to. A heavy sense of dread settled over the group like a cloak as the sun sank lower on the horizon. They had strict instructions that once it was ten o'clock they had to regroup at the beginning of the nature trail. No exceptions. Until then, they were determined to cover as much ground as carefully as they could in their search.

Mike followed the others, his eyes scanning the forest for any signs of something misplaced. Hopper stressed that anything that caught their eye could be important and to blow the whistle if they thought they found something.

Mike was trying hard not to think about the worst-case scenario. El could be seriously hurt. The fact that she hadn't returned with the other runners or at all.... Or worse yet... He blinked away the stringing in his eyes and forcibly pushed that final horrible thought from his mind. El was still alive. She had to be.

They'd been walking for over an hour and a half when Max spoke for the first time other than to call out El's name.

"I know El told you her mom died when she was ten." It was so quiet he almost didn't catch it. They two of them were slightly lagging behind the others as they walked, searching desperately with their flashlights and calling El's name. Darkness had begun to settle over the forest and they were getting increasingly desperate. There had been no telltale shriek of a whistle. It was like El just vanished into thin air.

"Yeah." Mike confirmed, his mouth twisting downwards.

Why is Max bringing this up now? He wondered. They had to keep calling El's name.

Max took a deep, shuddering breath. Mike could tell she was right on the edge; her pale face drawn and her eyes glossy.

“Did she ever tell you that her real dad is still alive?” Mike looked at Max in surprise and she made a bitter noise in the back of her throat. “Hopper is the real dad I guess, more than that asshole ever was.” She said darkly.

His mind raced. El never mentioned her biological father and Mike had just assumed that he was dead too.

“When her mom died he just... Didn’t claim her. Her mom didn’t put her dad’s name on the birth certificate because he was already married to someone else. She waited and waited and waited for him to come get her, but he never did...He didn’t want El.” Max clenched her fists, her voice wavering.

“My last words to El were *horrible* . What if...” Max’s voice cracked, “what if she thinks I didn’t want her either?” Tears poured down Max’s cheeks and she wiped at them angrily.

“Max.” He stopped, turning to look at her head on. Mike could feel tears stinging at his eyes, but he ignored them.

“I understand.” His voice was thick with emotion, “I said something horrible too. But we will find her. And then we will apologize until our faces turn blue because we have been huge jerks.” Max sniffled and nodded pitifully, tears still pouring down her cheeks as she swiped at them.

“We’re dumb.” She mumbled into her sleeve. Mike chuckled thickly.

“We are.” He agreed.

“Hey.” They hadn’t realized they’d drawn an audience; their other friends stopped and let them have a moment.

Lucas gently drew Max into a tight hug, the red head allowed herself to be enveloped in his arms.

“We’re going to find her.” Lucas assured both of them, holding Max as long as she let him.

“Yeah!” Dustin piped up, “you’re talking about El—who single handedly kicked Troy Wilkin’s ass. If she can do that she can handle

anything.” That brought a weak smile to the group’s faces.

“Now come on, let’s keep looking.” Will squeezed Mike’s shoulder for a moment in a comforting gesture before they continued their search.

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They didn’t find El. No one did.

Forced to regroup at the nature trail, everyone was told to disband for the night. Mike wanted to object. He wanted to keep searching for El until she was found! Judging by the look on his friend’s faces, they felt the same.

“Go home. We’ll resume at first light tomorrow. Try to get a good rest.” Hopper instructed tiredly. He appeared distracted; his gaze kept lingering on the forest behind him as though he could will his adoptive daughter to appear.

Just as Mike opened his mouth to protest, Max shot him a poisonous glare before looking back to the Chief.

“We will Chief. What time do you want us here tomorrow?” Max asked. Hopper looked relieved that they hadn’t argued.

“I’ll be here at five to start setting up.”

“We’ll be here for five too.” She said fiercely.

Hopper nodded and ruffled her hair in a way that Mike had seen him ruffle El’s. His anger and frustration at not finding El drained out of him slowly but surely. No wonder Max had stopped him from opening his big mouth! Whatever they were going through ad El’s friends... the Chief of Police was going through it too and probably worse because this was his *daughter* .

“We should try and rest up.” Will began in a glum voice. He looked pale and as Mike glanced at the others he realized that they all looked worse for wear. Their clothes were disheveled and covered with various forest materials. Dustin’s normally wild curls looked like an actual rat’s nest, there were so many bits of twigs and leaves stuck.

“Will, there you are. Come on. I’ll give you all a ride home.” Joyce appeared, looking almost as tired as Hopper. Joyce had of course remained to help look for El too. She mustered a smile for the group of teenagers.

“Thanks Mrs. Byers.” Lucas accepted the ride for the rest of the group.

They all piled into the Byers’ small car—it was quite a feat to fit them all in but everyone squished and it was managed.

Max was the first to be dropped off. Lucas peered after the Californian worriedly as they drove away. Her shoulders were slumped and they watched her boot a garbage can over as she walked up the sidewalk to her house.

Dustin was dropped off next, and then finally Lucas and Mike.

“Thank you for the ride Mrs. Byers.” Mike said sincerely, standing on the sidewalk between his and Lucas’s house. The neighbourhood was fairly dark, even for a Saturday night. He shivered as Will and Joyce bid them goodnight and drove away.

El was out in this... it had to be close to 20 degrees Fahrenheit! She could be freezing right now...

“I’ll ask my mom for a ride tomorrow Mike. Meet me out here for 4:40AM?” Lucas asked in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

“I’ll be out here.” Mike agreed, trying not to imagine El, cold, alone and possibly hurt. Lucas surprised him by placing a gentle, comforting hand on his shoulder. Mike looked up to his best friend.

“Mike. We’ll find El. She’s strong. She’ll be okay.” Lucas sounded so confident; Mike couldn’t help but want to believe his friend.

“Thanks Lucas. See you tomorrow.” He nodded gratefully.

“Goodnight.” They both know the words are empty. Neither of them will likely sleep—and if they do it certainly won’t be good.

...

The bitter taste of coffee on his tongue-helped give him the slap in the face that was necessary the next morning.

Mike had never drunk coffee before in his life, but after the night of hell sleep he would start just about any kind of habit if it helped. After watching his mom make coffee for years he knew exactly how to make it.

By 4:30AM He downed at least a pot of coffee. Despite that, his limbs ached with exhaustion from a night of tossing and turning.

When he'd returned home last night his mom had been pretty upset at first, but when Mike told her what was happening she'd given him a huge hug. She'd also given her permission to resume helping the search in the early morning. But it was Holly who was the one who had really needled Mike for being out.

"You were looking for the girl who wanted to apologize right?" She wasn't supposed to be up, but there she was in her pajamas, peering through her bedroom door as Mike had been about to head into his bedroom. He nodded at the question. Holly said nothing after that, but he could feel her accusatory gaze burn into him even after he'd slipped into his bedroom and shut the door.

At 4:39AM Mike headed out into the cold November morning. The quiet street was blanketed in darkness. It was strange to be up so early, nothing was moving in the neighbourhood. It was eerie.

He took a deep breath, watching his breath linger in the air. It was cold. El was out in this. He pulled his jacket around him tighter and clutched at the backpack on his shoulder. He'd packed a few things. A first aid kit. A spare jacket. A blanket. Just in case they found El.

Would they find her? Would she be okay? Mike pushed the negative thoughts out of his head. Of course they would find her.

At precisely 4:40AM the Sinclair's car pulled smoothly to the curb. Mike automatically reached for the back passenger side door and slid in.

"Good morning Michael." Mrs. Sinclair greeted with a sympathetic

smile. It was similar to the one his mom wore last night when he'd told her what was happening.

"Morning Mrs. Sinclair," Mike greeted. His voice sounded like sandpaper. "Thanks for the ride."

"Of course sweetie." Mrs. Sinclair nodded and waited for Mike to finish buckling up before they sped off. He caught Lucas's eye in the mirror of the vehicle and nodded.

Lucas had bags under his eyes and a grim, determined look to him that said: *I'm not going home until we find El.*

The car ride was silent until they pulled up in front of Max's house. A lone figure sat out on the front stoop, huddled over. Max stood and hurried to the other side of the vehicle, croaking a hello to Mrs. Sinclair, Lucas and Mike but not saying much else.

She looked like hell. She was the fairest out of the three of them and therefore the bags under her eyes stood out the most. It almost looked like she'd been punched in the nose, the dark circles were so pronounced.

By the time they pulled into the nature trail parking lot, Hopper was already there with the other two officers. The lights on their vehicles were flashing and Mike's heart leapt into his throat. He shared a panicked look with Max and Lucas but swallowed it down. The lights were probably just on so they'd be visible. Not because of anything bad.

As soon as Mrs. Sinclair brought the car to a complete stop Mike, Max and Lucas tumbled out with a hasty goodbye, racing for the Chief of Police.

If there were ever a person that looked like total shit, it was Jim Hopper. The man seemed to sag with exhaustion and the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Chief!" Max cried out immediately. "Any news?" She surprised both of them by hugging Hopper around his middle. He returned the hug briefly, looking like he too really needed that as Max released him.

“No news Mayfield.” Hopper sighed tiredly, tossing his cigarette to the pavement and snuffing it out with his boot.

“When do we start searching again?” Mike blurted.

“Not until 5:30. That’s when it starts to get light.” Hopper explained. “Until then, you can help us prep the kits for today. Everyone will be arriving shortly.” As much as Mike wanted to start looking immediately, he respected the chief’s wishes. It would do him no good to run into the forest and get lost. He allowed himself to be led over to the table. Vests, whistles, water... A myriad of volunteer supplies needed to be grouped together so that when the volunteers did start arriving they could get their stuff and get to it.

Only a few minutes later Joyce Byers raced into the parking lot, her vehicle screeched to a halt and Dustin and Will piled out of the car. They exchanged equally tired sounding greetings before assisting with the sorting.

By 5:20AM the parking lot was filling up steadily. Volunteers piled out of vehicles and headed for the police cars, lining up as Mike, Lucas, Will, Dustin and Max helped dole out the supplies. Every minute that wasn’t spent in the forest searching for El was excruciating, but Mike knew as soon as Hopper gave the okay—they were gone.

He glanced towards the dark, ominous trees as he handed out the items to volunteers.

He’d been screwing up all week. He’d screwed up by pushing his friend away. He’d screwed up by overreacting and completely blowing the situation out of proportion in the first place. El couldn’t rely on him when he’d avoided her and broken both of their hearts. But she could rely on him now. He wasn’t leaving the forest until they found their friend.

Hang on El. We’re coming.

...

Max Mayfield had always let her emotions get the best of her.

It was a fault of hers that she was extremely aware of and yet had no idea of how to fix.

Before leaving California so Neil and her mom could have a clean break at their new marriage, Max had let her anger and sorrow twist her words into something unbelievably ugly.

"If you really loved me you wouldn't let mom take me away from you." Max told her father. She'd seen the hurt lash across his features like a knife biting into his back and she'd immediately regretted the words.

It wasn't her father's fault that the courts had of course ruled in her mom's favor. Her dad was a single, divorced man who worked a lot, but Max loved him more than anything. She'd never been as close to her mom and that became only more and more apparent the longer her mom was courted by Neil Hargrove. While she wanted her mom to be happy, Max never dreamed that she'd take her away from California. Away from her few friends and her dad and the ocean... Into the small town of nowheresville Indiana that she'd never heard of.

As if being taken across the country by her mom and new husband was bad enough, Max had never signed on for the psycho that was her new stepbrother. He was the most manipulative person she'd ever known. He could be charming and charismatic, but he was a snake in the grass. Billy knew the power of words and emotions. He used them for his gain, to torment people and to decimate them.

Max knew Billy was angry. She was angry too. She pushed people away and holed up in her own little world. If she could just make it to graduation, then she could go back to her dad in California and this whole time in Hawkins with her stepfamily would seem like a bad dream.

That all changed the day she met El Hopper.

Max knew what being the new kid in this dumb little town was like.

The stares, the whispers, the judgment... It was poisonous. She didn't mean for it to happen but she found herself approaching the new kid. Mad had carefully constructed a world of her own in Hawkins, was

letting someone in who she'd ultimately leave behind worth it?

It was.

In El Hopper, Max gained a best friend. It was one of the best decisions she'd ever made to approach the other new kid. Even back in sunny California Max had never had such a close friend.

Somehow living in Hawkins, Indiana didn't seem so gray anymore and the world took on a little colour again with El as her best friend.

And then, somehow Max let more people in.

El nearly got mowed down by the group of boys she'd often seen at the arcade. And in that group was one particular boy that she'd grown to have a crush on embarrassingly enough. Max Mayfield didn't get crushes. She'd noticed him first at the arcade and then around school and somehow had ended up with a huge crush. All of his nerdy habits just made him a hundred times better in her eyes. He was different and she liked that. A lot.

Slowly, the small, lonely world that Max constructed for herself was breaking down.

The muted grays that had been her life in Hawkins seemed to blast apart into fireworks of bright, bold colours with the introduction of Lucas, Will, Dustin and Mike into her and El's lives.

She should have known it was too good to be true, because like always Max had to go and ruin it by getting caught up in her emotions.

When El had showed her that stupid list... Max couldn't believe it. She had specifically asked her best friend if it was a scheme to get Lucas and her together. El was the only one who knew about her huge crush on their classmate and seeing the confirmation that El had lied completely rocked her.

Anger burned through her veins. This was what she got for letting someone in. This was why she'd shut people out with cutting words and pushed them away.

"Just... just go away El. I don't need a friend like you." It was anger

and hurt and confusion that pushed those words through her lips and Max instantly regretted them.

El was already so devastated and had come to her for help. But Max couldn't help it. The words only hung between them and she didn't know how to take them back.

She couldn't stop picturing the hurt on El's face when she'd walked away from her in the park, or hearing the warbled apology ringing in her ears. Max stopped being angry around Thursday, and was only embarrassed by her actions. She'd said something so hurtful.

Was she just as bad as Billy?

The whole week Max had kept her head down. She could see her best friend's heart break a little more each time she ignored her, but the Californian didn't know what to do.

Normally when you said such a cutting thing, it was easy. Most people gave up. Max should have known that El wouldn't. El Hopper was different. She was a real friend and Max was so angry and embarrassed that once again she'd let her emotions get the better of her. The world seemed to lose a lot of the colour that Max had gotten so used to and El was the catalyst.

And that's when Max realized that she needed to grow a fucking backbone. She couldn't take back those words, you never could. But she could apologize and they could start there.

All week Lucas had been trying to get her to talk to El. He'd been steadfastly there for her, even though she could tell that he thought her and Mike were clearly in the wrong. But that was one of the things Max Mayfield was quickly coming to love about him. He was a no bullshit kind of person, which was hard to take when you were the one full of bullshit. He was honest with her and Max respected honesty much more than she could say.

So when Lucas came to try and convince her to go to El's race, Max had almost gone. But she didn't want to interrupt her friend's pre-race focus, forgetting that she herself was a large part of that routine as one of El's staunchest supporters.

Tomorrow. Max concluded. It was time to stop being a coward and apologize to her best friend.

But of course, that plan had blown up when she found out El went missing during her race.

She was livid and horrified and despondent all rolled into one atrocious ball when they didn't find El that same evening. It was a sleepless night as she lay in her bed, curled into herself and trying not to think that the worst had happened.

The next morning, as she waited on the stoop for Lucas to come pick her up, Max with tiredness and despair after a long, sleepless night. But today was something that she could pour her emotions into to fuel herself for the long day ahead.

She would find El. She would apologize to her for being such an awful friend. She could use the worry and the desperation of her emotions to get her through the day. Something that so far had only taken Max for a ride was something that she could harness and use to her advantage. If the pot of coffee didn't do the job, sheer determination would.

Max Mayfield wasn't leaving that forest until she found her friend and judging by the hardened looks on her friend's faces; they all felt the exact same way.

We're coming for you El.

Notes for the Chapter:

Congratulations! You've made it through the trilogy of despair and sorrow. As you might have noticed, this story will now have eleven chapters instead of ten. I couldn't fit the remaining scenes nicely into one more chapter so I have decided to break it up.

As this was an unexpected addition, I will release both chapters ten and eleven on June 13th!

Have a lovely rest of your day and I'll see you next week for the final chapters :)

10. White Rabbit

Pretty dresses looked the same when they are in tatters on the floor.

Every gift Papa had ever got for her lay in the wreckage. Dresses. Jewelry. Stuffed animals. Nothing was safe from her wrath. But she was still in the room, the room with the pretty pink door.

She'd hid in here after Mama's funeral. It was a sad affair with people in suits that El did not know and a wash of faces and hollow words that didn't mean anything to her.

She'd waited so long for him to come. For hours she stared hopefully at the door, expecting Papa to walk through, to take her into his arms and make the sadness go away.

But Papa wasn't coming for her.

The social worker waited outside that room impatiently, banging on the door every so often and every blow was a reminder that he wasn't here.

He was never here.

Not really. Expensive gifts were all she had of him, never his time. Never his love. He only loved Mama.

The window. It's the only way out. She climbed and then the world fell from beneath her. The ground is hard but she begins to run.

Desperately she runs and runs and runs. Her lungs burn. Her skin burns. Everything is burning bright: anger and sorrow and grief and it's going to swallow her whole.

Papa never wanted her.

...

El's body and heart aches when she first began to stir.

It took her a moment to register where she was, the harsh ledge beneath her bit into her tender skin and exhaustion clung to her

limbs. She ignored the wetness that clung to her lashes and struggled to sit up.

The ledge in the quarry is cold and quiet.

When El came to for the first time, she knew she was in trouble. Her arm was definitely broken, but there's not much to do at the moment other than try not to move it. Luckily it's not a compound fracture, but her skin is a deep, mottled red, purple and blue in the area where the break must have happened.

There's nothing on the ledge that can help her splint it. The break is the worst of her injuries aside from the painful scrapes caused by the rocks. Any hopes of climbing up from were lost with the break in her arm and instead she'd called for help until her voice was broken and failed her. The quarry was much too vast—it ate her calls for help whole.

It was almost cruel.

She could hear people calling her name above the quarry, but they couldn't hear her. The small ledge she'd landed on when she'd fallen was hidden unless you stuck your head over the side of the quarry and looked straight down.

The little sleep she got that night was broken and freezing. El had huddled her limbs together trying to keep any heat—but the cold had eaten away at her.

Despite this, El knows she is damn lucky to be alive.

She could have easily fallen straight into the dark, ominous waters of the quarry or smashed apart on the rocks below. If she survived the fall to the ledge, El was determined to survive until someone found her.

It was grey and cold outside; fat snowflakes floated lazily downwards into the deep darkness of the quarry water.

El drew her knees closer to her chest, trying to fight off the violent shivers that made her entire body quiver. The Hawkins High running pants and long sleeved shirt uniform is little protection against the

cold November weather. Her stomach gnawed at her incessantly, but El had nothing to eat or drink. Miserable and cold and alone she tried not to think about that dream, but fails.

I haven't had that dream in a long time.

Not since her and Hopper moved from the city and back to his hometown of Hawkins. Before they'd moved, it took a long time for El to fully trust that Hopper wasn't going to abandon her. She'd been plagued with the reoccurring nightmares of her mother's death and her biological father's subsequent dismissal of her, an illegitimate child by the 'other' woman.

Even with the Troy situation that feeling never truly left her heart and maybe it never would, but of course Hopper proved her wrong *every* time. Sure, they had their share of fights, but what father and teenage daughter didn't? She pushed and pushed and pushed against Hop, but he was *always there*. And that's what El reminded herself over and over as she huddled through the cold night alone.

Being adopted by Hop was the best thing that ever happened to El in her entire life.

Hopper was... Hop. He adopted her when she was scared and alone and *angry*. So angry. All the time. Angry about her mother dying, angry that a man who was her father—someone who was supposed to care for you and love you and want you...didn't. But Hop did.

Father, Papa, Dad... This word was something that meant nothing to El anymore—but Hopper was all of what a dad was supposed to be. In the three years they'd been together she couldn't bring herself to call Hopper anything else... because he was so much better. He'd given her a home, unconditional love and her special Eggo waffles every Sunday for breakfast. A man who had neither loved her mother or was actually related to her by blood gave her all these things... and she loved him for it.

But I never told him any of this. Does he know I love him? It was an ugly thought El was trying hard not to think about. Stupid people panicked and panic only made things worse, but it was an ugly, dark thought that festered.

What if I never see Hopper again? Or Max? Or Dustin? Or Will? Or Lucas... Or Mike? Dark eyes overflowing with hurt flash across her thoughts and El screwed her eyes shut, willing herself not to cry. She really can't afford to expend the energy for crying right now.

What's wrong with you?

El knew it was something Mike had said in the heat of the moment, but it had cut straight to her core. For years after her mom passed away, she asked herself the same question: *what is wrong with me?* Why hadn't her birth father wanted her? Was there something that she had done?

And what about Max? Would she ever get to see her best friend again? And she was still so mad... All El wanted was their usual Friday nights together again.

Her stomach gave a particularly loud growl and El shifted in surprise, jolting her from those awful thoughts. Right now she needed to focus. The plan hadn't changed. She knew Hopper would be sending out a search party again once it got light enough. All her energy would have to go into trying to flag someone's attention.

Until then, it was huddle and keep warm.

.

It's unclear how much time had passed before El heard the call. The sky was still grey, but it's getting lighter out.

"El!" The sound is muffled and she frowned, straining her ears. Her heart stills and she listened hard for anything—anything to tell her that someone is out there.

"El!" *It's Mike!* El's heart swooped with hope sharply. She scrambled out as best as she could from the ledge, trying to peer upwards around the quarry cliff. There's not much room on the ledge and El is careful not to lose her footing as she tried to peer upwards.

"El! Just say something!" Max! Tears sprang to her eyes as El realized that it was her friends. They're here. Looking for her. Even Max and

Mike, who were still upset.

“Mike! Max! I’m here!” Her voice is strangled and hoarse and the vast quarry swallowed her words greedily.

There. She can just barely see the glimmer of flashlights up to her far left. If her friends are here, the search and rescue had resumed.

“El! Where are you?” It’s Lucas who called this time.

“I’m over here!” El tried again, trying to muster more than a hoarse yell that died halfway. The lights are moving further away from her and panic pounds against her skull.

No. No. No. No. No!

Tears pour down her cheeks but El doesn’t even notice them as she watched the lights from her friend’s flashlights get farther and farther. They can’t see her. She’s too close to the cliff side and the ledge is obscured from the height they’re at. Her limbs shake from the desperation that surged through her. She has to keep trying.

“MIKE!” El screamed. It was a scream that tore through her parched throat. Every ounce of strength she had left was poured into it and El held her breath.

The lights had to come back... they had to. But as the greyness settled over her once more and the silence of the quarry resumed, she slowly sank to the ledge in despair.

They hadn’t heard her. She hadn’t been strong enough to make them hear her. Her friends had been so, so, so, close.

A sob wracked through her aching frame. Tears flooded El’s vision as she pulled her legs up to her chest once more and huddled against the cliff. The sound of her sharp sobs was unbelievably loud in the ominous silence of the quarry.

And then...

“EL! Are you here?” Mike’s voice is muffled and far away, but El can hear the panic and desperation bleeding from it.

Mike. He heard me? Shock coursed through her, but El knew she couldn't waste time. Scrambling up as fast as she could, El stood as close to the edge of the ledge that she could safely manage. It would increase the chances of her friends spotting her.

There! She could see the light of their flashlights flooding the direction where they'd disappeared.

"I'm here Mike!" El tried to shout, her throat burning from the exertion. It doesn't come out as much more than a hoarse yell.

"EL!" Relief flooded through her so violently her legs wobbled beneath her. The flashlights change direction and moments later El is blinded by light as the flashlights are thrust over the edge of the quarry. El can't see their faces but she can hear her friends' voices and it's the best thing she has ever heard.

"El! Holy shit, we found her. Blow the whistle!" Max called tearfully from the top of the cliff. The shrill shriek of a whistle being blown over and over quickly followed.

"El—are you okay? Are you hurt?" Mike shouted desperately.

"My arm," El called as best as she could, pointing to her bruised arm. "It's broken." Her voice barely carried up the side of the cliff, but they seem to have understood. Their flashlights move in a dizzying array of activity and she can hear them conversing furiously between one another.

"It's going to be okay El. Hopper will be coming any minute and we'll get you out of there." Will shouted down.

El nodded, her head swam from both relief and the dizzying lights blinding her. She sat down on the ledge before her legs gave out. To tumble off the side of the cliff now, when rescue was so close would be incredibly stupid.

They didn't have to wait long for Hopper.

"Kid—I'm here, it's going to be okay. We're going to get you up." El wanted to laugh and cry simultaneously when she heard Hopper's voice.

“Okay Hop.” El tried to shout as best as she could. Hopper had come for her. Her friends had come for her. Even if they still needed to resolve their disagreement... Max and Mike had come for her.

“El! You must be hungry—catch!” Dustin yelled. Before anyone could stop him, there was a strange noise as something skittered down the cliff side and landed beside her. Startled, she leaned over and peered curiously at what he’d thrown.

It was a *pudding cup*.

A shaky, surprised laugh escaped El and she peered upwards at the flood of light. She thought she could hear someone say: “seriously, Dustin?! You could have hit her!” But moments later, a bottle of water landed and nearly skidded off the side of the ledge.

“Hang on El—I have a spoon here!” There was a moment of silence as she waited, thinking about how ridiculously amazing it was that her friend was trying to feed her in this exact moment.

There was a sort of whistling noise, and El watched as the spoon flew right by her and over the ledge, presumably meeting its fate in the water far down below.

“Oh shit. Sorry. I should have seen that one coming.” Dustin apologized from up above.

A giggle bubbled up in her throat in disbelief. Disbelief that she was stuck on the ledge in the quarry and had somehow not fallen to her death or injured herself even worse. Disbelief that Dustin was currently trying to feed her pudding. Disbelief that her *friends* had found her.

One of her friends balled up a blanket and tossed it down to her. El caught it with the tips of her fingers and wrapped herself in its warmth greedily.

The morning passed by in a blur after that.

El relished her pudding and sipped the bottle of water Dustin had thrown for her; it tasted like the most amazing combination after nearly twenty-four hours of no food or water. While she enjoyed her

snack, there was a flurry of activity on top of the cliff.

Her friends took turns laying down on the top of the cliff and talking to her. They talked about what was happening with the rescue (Lucas), told her jokes (Dustin) and about how they would go for waffles again after this soon (Will). She wasn't able to respond to them, her throat was so sore, but El really appreciated the sentiment.

Two voices that were shyly absent were among the two that El most wanted to hear. She tried not to think too much into it. Max and Mike had the right to be mad, and the first thing El planned on doing when she got off this ledge was to apologize again.

The rescue took some time. Hopper couldn't simply rappel down the cliff side and scoop her up with a broken arm—and had been forced to call on the state's emergency rescue unit. It took several hours for them to get to Hawkins, Indiana.

By the end of the morning, El was strapped by a two-man team of rope emergency responders onto a board, and very carefully lifted up the side of the cliff by the rope rescuer technicians. There was a cheer that broke out much to her embarrassment as soon the board safely touched the ground and the emergency responders began to unstrap her.

"Hop." El gasped as soon as saw him. His face was so pale and he looked so much more haggard than his usual tired, grumpy demeanour. Hopper didn't need anymore prompting and as soon as the last strap was free, he carefully gathered her in his arms in a hug that squished all the air from her lungs and yet he was so careful not to touch her injured arm. Her legs nearly gave out in the relief that she was hugging her adoptive father.

"Don't ever do that again kid." Hopper's said thickly.

El nodded into his shoulder, trying to stop the tears that welled in her eyes. Even though she was okay, El realized that she had come really close to not being okay. They stayed like that for a long moment before she sniffled and Hop gently held her at arms length, his sharp gaze looking her over carefully.

"We're going to the hospital. We need to get your arm looked at." Hopper nodded at the ambulance crew standing by, who stood by a gurney they'd brought out.

El nodded, her gaze finally passing Hop and catching sight of her friends. Each of them looked as though they'd gotten about as much sleep as Hop had. Will had dark circles under his eyes and Dustin was much paler than he usually was. Mike looked like he was swaying on his feet and Lucas stood beside a splotchy, red-faced Max who looked probably the worse out of all of them. Her eyes were swollen and red, her skin almost translucent she was so pale and as soon as El made eye contact with Max, she broke.

"El!" Max wailed, breaking away from Lucas and immediately closing the distance between the two of them.

"I'm so sorry—I've been so stupid and mean and I was just so angry but I know it was dumb—" El found herself being squished once more in a carefully fierce hug. Though her body ached and her arm was broken, El returned the hug just as fiercely.

"It's okay Max, I shouldn't have tried to play matchmaker. I understand why you were mad. Can you forgive me?" She said hoarsely into her best friend's hair. Max just let out a choked laugh and hugged El harder.

"You're asking me if I forgive *you*?" Max sounded like she could scarcely believe what her friend was asking. El had just been rescued from the side of a freaking cliff and here she was *apologizing*? "You're my good luck charm. How could I not?" Max gave El a tried, teary grin.

Once again a surge of emotions crashed through El, relief, happiness, disbelief... El was so incredibly glad that Max forgave her. This week had been absolute hell and though it may be something they should talk about further, this was the best that could possibly happen for now.

Both girls laughed shakily and it was at this moment that she was nearly bombarded by the rest of their friends had Hopper not whipped out an arm, stopping the boys in mid step.

“Hold up.” He growled. “El needs medical attention. You can ride with Callaghan. He’ll take you to the hospital. You can meet us there.” Hopper’s tone left no room for argument. After the night of hell everyone had, no one was going to argue.

“We can take her from here Chief Hopper.” One of the paramedics said smoothly, stepping in to help El on the gurney. They loaded her carefully into the ambulance; exhaustion seeped into her as she lay there. Another paramedic was checking her blood pressure and other vitals when Max and Hopper climbed into the ambulance, squishing in to the small space without another word.

“Er... usually it’s just one person allowed in the...” The lead paramedic trailed off when both Hopper and Max pinned him with fierce glares and he cleared his throat. “But of course this is an exception.”

“We’ll see you at the hospital, El.” Dustin called into the ambulance before the doors closed.

The ambulance began to move and El found her eyelids becoming heavier and heavier, it became a Herculean task just to keep them open.

“Have a nap kid, you earned it.” Hopper said gruffly, his normally stern gaze softened as he looked down at her. El nodded and grasped for her adoptive father’s hand, which he willingly offered to her. She let the familiar smell of nicotine and forest wash over her, overwhelmed that she was so lucky to have people who loved her.

“I love you, Hop.” El murmured, finally letting her eyelids slide shut.

“I love you too kid.”

El slipped into sleep with a smile on her face.

...

At the hospital El was immediately taken for an x-ray and then hooked up to an IV.

Dehydration, fractured humerus, mild abrasions... El drifted in and

out as the doctors listed her injuries and subsequent treatments to Hopper. Exhaustion seemed to seep into every pore, her body finally giving out after such a stressful period of time.

“She is very lucky that her injuries were not more severe.” Doctor Owens reiterated several times to Hopper before prescribing pain medication for the broken arm and a special ointment to help the scrapes heal and to prevent infection. Several of the scrapes on her back were deeper, the nurses had to pick gravel and bits of tree out of her skin, which had tried to start healing over in the time she’d been huddled on the ledge.

Max continued to hold her hand the whole time, refusing to move from her friend. None of the nurses or doctor questioned it and El was grateful.

.

El sat in the hospital bed attempting to eat her lunch and Max cheering her on from the sideline of her bed. It was a little tricky to suddenly not be able to use one arm, but thank goodness it hadn’t been her dominant arm to break.

Hopper poked his head into the room, looking as exhausted as El still felt. But she knew he wouldn’t go home until later. She would have to stay overnight for observation (they were concerned about a concussion, or worse injuries surfacing), so she wouldn’t be permitted to leave until tomorrow when they cleared her.

“Your friends are chomping at the bit out here and the doc says it’s okay for them to come in now. Would you like to see them?” Hopper asked.

El glanced at Max, who nodded in encouragement.

“I’d love to see them.” El agreed softly.

Hopper nodded and disappeared out of the room to go fetch her friends. It was astounding to her that they had waited for her for this long. It had been about roughly five hours since she’d been admitted to the hospital. She felt warm all over knowing that they had waited

for her.

“El!” Dustin burst out only a minute later, nearly sliding past the doorway to her room in his hurry. Like a small herd of stampeding elephants, they charged into the hospital room.

“Hey!” Max barked suddenly, when they careened towards El a little too quickly, “El is hurt here. So be *gentle* with her.” Max glared at Dustin, Will, Lucas and Mike. They sheepishly calmed down, instead opting to give her a gentle pat on her good arm or a careful side hug.

“We’re so glad you’re okay El.” Will said seriously, glancing her over in the hospital bed as though to make sure she was all in one piece.

El’s heart lodged in her throat at the sincerity reflected in his features.

“Thanks guys. I feel much better already.” El chuckled, laying back into her pillows. They chuckled along too, albeit reluctantly. It was a little strange to see El in the hospital bed, she looked so small and seeing her attached to the IV wasn’t helping either. Max seemed to register their nervousness and decided to clue them in.

“El will be fine. Her upper arm bone is broken, and she’s got some wicked scrapes but Doctor Owens said she should be out of here by tomorrow. The tubes are just because she’s dehydrated.” Max explained, seeing some of the tension ease out of their friends’ shoulders.

“Wait. You’ve got a cast?” Dustin blurted suddenly, just noticing the rather large plaster cast with alarming eagerness.

“Um... yes?” El confirmed questioningly.

“We need to sign it!” Dustin exclaimed, “no cast is complete without your friends signing it.”

El glanced down at her cast, bewildered. She’d never had a broken bone before, was this something people did? Admittedly the plaster cast was very boring and would be a firm part of her life for at least the next six weeks. It would be nice to have something to spruce it up a little.

“Okay,” she agreed, “I’d like that.”

“Now Will, hand me your drawing utensils so I can sign El’s cast.” Dustin held his hand out, palm up towards Will, who gave him an incredulous look.

“What made you think I’d have my drawing stuff?” Will asked amusedly.

“You’re an artist aren’t you? Aren’t you always supposed to carry the tools of your trade?” Dustin demanded. Will rolled his eyes.

El watched as they bickered for a moment, it was music to her ears even when Lucas joined in. After the hell week of isolating herself from her friends, El was more than happy to hear their silly bickering once again.

As the teasing got a little more heated and even Max joined in, El found her gaze drifting to the one person she still had yet to talk with seriously. Mike reddened as he was caught sneaking a glance at her, his dark eyes filled with worry.

“Okay, okay. Let’s just go ask the front desk if we could borrow a marker.” Lucas said exasperatedly.

“Yeah, alright.” Dustin agreed quickly.

Max glanced over to El and seemed to catch how her gaze lingered on Mike.

“I’ll come too. Will, let’s go. Wheeler, hold down the fort. We’ll be back in a couple minutes.” Max took charge. El didn’t miss the significant look her best friend shot Mike as she herded their other friends from the room.

The door closed with a soft click, leaving the two of them alone. El’s heart lodged in her throat, but she needed to get this out.

“Mike...” El started.

“El. I’m so sorry.” Mike blurted at the same time. Surprised, El didn’t continue and Mike took that hesitance to let it all out. “I’m so, so, so

sorry El. I've been a huge wastoid. I overreacted after I saw that list and I jumped to all the worst conclusions and instead of talking it over with you like a real friend I just walked away."

"Mike." El said softly, but it didn't seem to even register as he just kept rambling.

"I didn't even give you a moment to explain the list! And I hurt you. I'm sorry, I missed you all week, even when I was angry and then on Friday Will and Dustin tore into me and I realized what a huge asshole I was being... And then I was too embarrassed to show my face at your race the next day. I was so sure you'd hate me and I wouldn't blame you because I didn't listen—"

El realized that this apology would probably keep going forever if Mike had the chance. Max had clearly given them some space so they could talk, but they had maybe five minutes at most before they were no longer alone. So with a calculated decision, El gently grasped Mike's hand and swept her thumb over his knuckles, stopping him cold as he looked down to their joined hands in astonishment.

"Mike." El said once again, keeping a firm grasp on his hand. He was staring at her in something akin to wonder and she could barely believe that he was here. His dark eyes were wide and his lips parted subtly in shock when she didn't let go of his hand and instead held it tighter. He looked adorable and exhausted, but he was here.

"I'm sorry too. I know that list hurt you because it was a strange list to make. But I promise you, it was just a list I made because I was trying to psych myself up to make new friends. The third point of my list was 'we all become friends' because I'm kind of a dweeb." El offered Mike a brief smile and she squeezed his hand once more.

"I accept your apology Mike. We both made mistakes this week and it was awful. Promise me next time we'll try to talk it over first?"

"Next time?" Mike asked confusedly, worry laced into his voice.

"Well, I just assume at some point we'll be getting into another disagreement. Probably over the cupcake versus muffin debate because I'm firmly on Dustin's side with this one. I think they're

secretly the same thing.”

Mike stared at her, his jaw dropped and El tried to maintain the serious look on her face.

And then he laughed.

It was loud and unexpected and her heart quivered at the sound. She cracked and the giggles soon turned into full on, belly shaking laughter as they gripped hands, El nearly rolling off the bed and Mike nearly falling off his chair. This was how their friends found them a minute later, unable to speak from laughter.

Max merely sat back down in her seat, sharing a brief smile with El before Dustin, Will and Lucas quickly crowded around.

The rest of the time passed by in a blur, each of her friends taking great care to sign her cast. Before they all knew it, Joyce poked her head into the room and announced that visiting hours were finished and the kids had to go home. She'd come in earlier to say hello to El, along with Coach Kline and a few of the other cross country runners (which had surprised her).

“You can see El tomorrow. She'll be released and after school you can go see her then.” Joyce promised the stricken looking teens. “Isn't that right Hop?” Joyce asked pointedly, turning to the Chief of Police who lingered behind her.

“After school. Sure.” He grunted, sounding enthused that their small cabin would soon be overrun with a herd of noisy, rambunctious teenagers.

“Goodnight El.” Will bid with a gentle pat on the arm, leaving to go stand by his mom.

“Oh, here El.” Dustin rummaged through his backpack and held out a walkie-talkie. El accepted it with a confused glance.

“If you need anything you can radio us! Well... not me because I'm lending you mine but if you need to get ahold of anyone tonight.” Dustin explained sheepishly. El's face lit up and she gripped the walkie-talkie a little closer.

“Thank you Dustin.” She said happily. It was a touching thought.

One by one her friends said goodnight to her, but Mike lingered behind as the rest of their friends filed from the room. Hopper eyed both Mike and El for a long moment, but then snorted and granted them a moment of privacy, slipping outside to likely go see Joyce out.

“About earlier,” Mike turned to El and her stomach fluttered when his dark eyes met hers, “I promise. I promise next time we’ll try to talk it out before I let my self-doubt get the best of me. And I’ll even let you cry on my shoulder after the debate because I don’t think anyone else is on your and Dustin’s side.” The weight of Mike’s promise is not lost on El and it’s said with such eager sincerity that it makes her heart ache.

“I’ll hold you to that Wheeler.” El agreed with an exhausted grin.

Mike returned the grin and hesitated, as though he wanted to do something and then thought better of it. El feels something is different. It is not in a good or a bad way, but there’s a shyness in Mike once again that felt as though they’d taken a step back and El can’t let that happen. Even after the events of this week, she knows more than ever how she feels about Mike Wheeler.

If she has to buy a billboard and place it right outside of his house declaring “El Hopper has a huge, fat crush on Mike Wheeler” that’s what she would do. If El wanted anything to happen with Mike, she had to take the initiative and make it happen—because goddammit El really wanted to take Mike on a date and make him blush and maybe even get a chance to kiss him.

“Wait. Mike.” She called out, halting him in his step. Mike turned and looked back at El curiously, his brow furrowed adorably and his dark eyes concerned as he waited for her to continue.

“Want to go with on a date with me to Benny’s this Thursday?” El’s question seemed to hang endlessly in the air. Eyes wide, Mike froze. So she decided to continue talking until Mike’s brain rebooted.

“Sorry. I know Thursday is a strange day for a first date. But Friday is

traditionally Max's night and I know she would fight you if we even tried to go on a date that day so I thought Thursday was the better alternative to bloodshed." El explained, trying to ignore the flutters in her chest. She knew her cheeks had to be bright pink by now.

"A date?" Mike inhaled sharply, his eyes still wide and a blush steadily erupting across his cheeks. He looked to her so hopefully that her breath was stolen for a moment, so she nodded instead. She would confirm it a million times over if she had to for Mike.

"On Thursday." He repeated once more, coming a little closer to the bed. "With you?" By now Mike was completely pink, but as he gazed down at El with a mix of hopefulness and awe and something that El could not name, she returned his gaze and nodded once more.

"I'll pick you up at the bike racks for 3:15?" El added hopefully.

A smile broke out over Mike's lips and he did something that surprised the both of them. He leaned down to El's bed and pressed a small, lingering kiss on her cheek. A gasp slipped past her lips.

"It's a date." He agreed bashfully, standing back up. By now both of their complexions matched one another with the difference that El was fairly sure her cheek must have burst into flames where he'd kissed her.

"Mike what the heck are you..." Lucas trailed off as he came back into the room. It only took him two seconds to realize what had happened when he saw his two friends a bright, bright pink. Mike also didn't help things when he practically jumped away from El like a startled cat.

"Oh I see. If you're done we've got to get going. Mrs. Byers is waiting." Lucas grinned at the two of them. Mike nodded, nearly stumbling over his own feet as he followed his friend to the door.

"Goodnight El." They both bid her goodnight and just like that she was alone once more. El let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding and nearly melted into a puddle right on the spot.

Mike Wheeler kissed me goodnight. That was definitely something she

could get used to.

Hopper came in only a few minutes later. He looked exhausted and the smell of smoke clung to him. He slumped into Max's vacated chair by her bed. His gaze lingered on her face for a moment, which El knew was still bright pink but he didn't say anything.

"Well kid. The doc is trying to kick me out so you can get some proper rest. But say the word and I'll stay right here overnight." Hopper said sincerely.

El could already feel her head moving: *no*.

"You should go home and get some rest Hop. I'm fine now." El assured her adoptive father. He looked a little unsure, but she held up the walkie-talkie.

"If I need anything, I'll call. I promise." And she meant it. Her firm words seemed to have the desired effect on Hopper because after a moment he stood and touched the top of her head affectionately.

"Goodnight kid. I'll be here first thing in the morning okay?"

El nodded and Hopper gave her a small smile before he left for the evening, leaving her truly alone in the hospital room for the first time since she'd been admitted earlier today. It felt strange in here now without the packed, rambunctious crowd. It felt empty but El didn't feel alone, because she wasn't.

Not with Hopper, Joyce or her friends. They had found her. El was so lucky to have people who loved her. Even her coach and some of the other athletes had briefly come to wish her well!

It was a warm, happy feeling that spread through her heart as she finally fell into a restful, deep sleep.

...

The hospital released El the following afternoon.

Doctor Owens kept her a little longer for observation, making sure that no other injuries surfaced in that time and that El was comfortable with the prescribed painkillers. Though her stay in the

hospital was short, she knew she'd be seeing a lot of Doctor Owens in the following weeks for checkups and eventually therapy to help her arm grow strong again once it was out of the cast.

Hopper actually took the day off on Monday and instead of going straight home they stopped at Benny's for milkshakes and burgers. Benny himself came out from the kitchen and sat with them a little while and El was relieved for the sense of normalcy. After such a terribly eventful weekend, it felt good to sit there with Hopper and Benny and eat good food.

Monday after school was a glorious time.

As soon as they could manage, her friends were banging on the door of Hopper cabin and flooded the small home much to Hopper's (feigned) annoyance and El's delight.

It was a tight squeeze with all six teens in the living area, but El wouldn't have traded it for the world. Hopper hid in his room most of the time while her friends were visiting, but he did come out to briefly take orders for pizza and step out to go get it.

Once everyone was fed and watered and it was getting late, he kicked them all out with the promise that El would be returning to classes tomorrow and to look out for her.

Tuesday was a strange mix of being bombarded by her classmates asking what happened that weekend and her friends rallying around her and telling some people who were a little too nosy to screw off.

Even her track and cross country teammates rallied around her, which El was surprised and touched by. The word was quickly put out to leave El Hopper the hell alone.

While the scary events of that fateful weekend may have faded from the gossip of Hawkins' locals and her classmates, it didn't fade so quickly for her friends. By Wednesday, El finally had to tell them that it was okay! She wasn't going to disappear again.

All week they'd been squishing themselves around her like cute little scared deer. She felt like the president with her own club of

bodyguards that's how close everyone stuck to her.

Of course she wasn't cross with them. If the same thing had happened to any of them El would have felt exactly the same. It was endearing, if a little embarrassing when they got stuck in a doorway at least more than once that week.

...

El all but sprinted to the bike racks on Thursday after school.

All day her heart had felt as though it would erupt in giddiness and she was fairly certain she'd annoyed the hell out of Max with her fidgeting all day. Of course Max knew why El was so excited: today was her official first date with Mike Wheeler!

A maelstrom of excitement, dread and butterflies slammed into her once when she reached the trusty bike racks.

Exactly one minute later an equally out of breath Mike appeared next to El at the bike racks. His cheeks were flushed pink in both exertion and excitement, he reached the bikes and gave El a small, nervous smile.

"Hi El." He breathlessly.

"Hi Mike." She returned the greeting giddily.

Mike was here. At the bike rack—and they were about to go on a date! They stared at each other in an equally starry eyed manner, so lost in each others gazes that they didn't notice the arrival of their friends.

"Ugh. Can't you two make googly eyes somewhere else?" Dustin complained loudly, shouldering past Mike to get to his bike. Mike glared at his friend, the momentary spell broken over the both of them with the intrusion.

"It's young love Dustin, you can't blame them." Will grinned, making his voice sound like an old man's. El and Mike coloured brilliantly at their teasing.

“Seriously. You ran out of there so fast I thought you’d already be gone.” Max announced her presence loudly, grinning at El with her hands on her hips, head cocked to the side. “Don’t you have a date to get to?”

It was El’s turn to glare.

“Yes! We were just about to get going...” El trailed off when she looked down at her cast and then at Mike, and then to the bike. Her face fell.

How were they supposed to get to Benny’s if her arm was broken? Could she ride a bike? She hadn’t thought this part of the date through at all.

Mike seemed to follow her line of thought and quickly jumped in. “I’ll ride really carefully El. We’ll go slow.”

She beamed at him and this time Max, Will, Dustin and Lucas (who had just arrived) groaned simultaneously.

“Please. Go on your date. We can’t handle your mush.” Lucas teased.

Mike flipped their friends off and without any more prompting he grabbed his bike from the rack. He climbed on first and steadied the bike before El tried to climb on. Max made sure to stand by in case her friend toppled over trying to get on, but El managed to settle herself down behind Mike without any problems.

“Er... This is going to get a little cozy.” El warned, before wrapping her one good arm around Mike’s waist and pressing herself closer to his back. It was the only comfortable way El didn’t feel like she’d topple off.

Their friends wolf whistled and Mike kicked off, his face beet red at their proximity.

“You guys are such jerks.” Mike shot as he and El took off. They laughed in response and El pressed her face a little closer into his shoulder to hide her pleased embarrassment at their friend’s teasing.

True to his word, Mike biked slowly and carefully, intent on not

having any accidents. El fell into the comfortable rhythm of being on the back of Mike's bike once more, only the hammering of her heart in her chest threatened to give her nervousness away.

She'd never been on a date before. It wasn't something that interested her until Mike. As the two of them got closer and closer to Benny's, she found herself really looking forward to it.

Mike brought his bike to a smooth stop and carefully helped steady El as she climbed off the bike. Her stomach flipped deliciously at the feel of Mike's hand in her own and she shot him a grateful smile, waiting patiently while he parked his bike before they both headed into the diner.

They waved to Benny, who was busy in the kitchen and headed towards a booth at the back of the diner, partially hidden from view and inconspicuous.

El slid in first and Mike followed suit, sitting across from her at the table, looking just as nervous as she currently felt. They shared a brief, nervous smile before Benny came to the table.

"Hey there Hopper, hi there." Benny grinned at El and offered a friendly nod to Mike. "What can I get for you two?"

Being that it was still too early for dinner and it was a school night, El and Mike had opted to go to Benny's for a treat instead of a meal.

"Hi Benny," El greeted happily, a little glad to have a temporary distraction from her nerves, "I'll have a chocolate milkshake please." She turned to Mike quizzically.

"Er... Same please!" He stammered. Benny looked between the two kids, a knowing look dawned over his features.

"Coming right up." Benny agreed with a non-too subtle wink in El's direction. She blushed, knowing she'd been caught: Benny knew this was a date.

"How's your arm today?" Mike blurted when it was just the two of them again. El glanced down at her cast, her fingertips tracing over her friend's signatures and silly doodles out of habit.

“It’s good, thanks to you guys.” El smiled.

All week her friends had been taking the “El’s pack mule” duty very seriously. She wasn’t supposed to carry anything too heavy because it would put unnecessary strain on her bad arm. Her friends had quite literally taken that problem right out of her hands by insisting on carrying her stuff.

“We’re happy to carry your things as long as you need.” Mike said seriously. El could tell he was thinking about the events of last weekend and decided that she needed to squash that unhappy bug before it seeped into their date.

“Here you go you two. Enjoy.” Benny said boisterously, depositing their milkshakes in front of them and leaving the two teens in peace once more. She took a deep breath.

“Do you want my cherry? I don’t really like—“

“Mike I like you. A lot.” El stated at the same time.

Mike’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened. He was halfway between reaching for the stem of his cherry and froze at the unexpected statement.

“I think you’re amazing and good and you’re really cool. I like you.” El rambled, deciding that if she was going to go for it, then she was *really* going to go for it.

There was no one around them in the neighbouring booths so it would be very unlikely that anyone would hear them. She had been waiting all week to say those words to him and almost blurted them out in class yesterday. El actually wanted to wait until after their date to tell him, but now was as good of a time as any.

“And yes, I like the cherries. Thank you.” El’s fingers brushing against Mike’s seemed to jar him out of his shock as she plucked the cherry from his milkshake and popped it into her mouth. She chewed it for a moment, watching the adorable blush spread like wildfire across his freckled cheeks.

“You like me?” Mike finally repeated, his mouth still hanging open.

“Yes. A lot.” El confirmed. She would say it a million times if she had to, just so there would be no question. She was tired of dancing around her feelings. Now they were out in the open for the better (or worse).

Mike continued to grow increasingly red and El vaguely wondered if she’d just broken him by being so honest.

“I like you too.” Mike finally blurted, his brain reconnecting with his body and he sat up straight in his seat.

“I think you’re the most amazing person I know. And you’re so kind and pretty and wow...” Mike looked at her so happily in that moment that she couldn’t help but smile back, seeking out his hand with her own. Their fingers laced together easily, as though they’d done the motion a thousand times over. He was warm and gentle and El sighed at the feeling. All the nerves, all the butterflies and the uncertainty... it had been worth it. Finally it was all out in the open and holy shit Mike liked her back!

“I just never thought you’d like me back.” Mike finished, his tone still full of disbelief even as his eyes lingered on their joined hands.

“I didn't think you liked me back either.” El admitted giddily.

It was like Christmas morning, Halloween and every holiday all rolled into one she was so excited. They momentarily locked gazes and then it was as though a plug was pulled. All the nervousness, all the awkwardness—gone. El giggled first and then Mike joined her and they laughed.

They’d been so dumb!

Dancing around each other and so uncertain of their own emotions that they hadn’t said anything. But this... This was the best outcome El could ever hope for.

Mike Wheeler likes me. The thought repeated itself over and over again as though still trying to convince herself that this was real! All the signs had been there, but to hear Mike himself tell her... It was *amazing*.

She felt like she could fly and melt into a puddle all at once. It was a strange, disconcerting and exciting feeling.

With that, any lingering awkwardness melted away. They talked about the upcoming Dungeons & Dragons game that Max and El would be introduced into. They'd each been given some literature to read to start building their characters and though Max had accepted it with a grumble, she'd still accepted it.

It was comfortable and fun and El loved it. If this is what dates were with Mike Wheeler, you could sign her up for more! She'd been so nervous, but what was there to be nervous about when you were talking to a friend and drinking a milkshake at Benny's? The hard part was over.

She was busy laughing at some of the more outlandish campaigns he'd designed for the game when suddenly Mike got a strange expression on his face.

"El." There was an exasperated smile pulling at the corner of Mike's lips and El found herself trying hard to rip her gaze away from them.

"Yeah?"

"Don't look now... But our friends are stalking us." Mike nonchalantly jerked his head to her left. El spun carefully around in her seat, confused, until she spotted the not so inconspicuous group in the other corner of Benny's. All four people were holding newspapers up... but they had eyeholes cut into them!

"Really? Do they not realize how obvious they are?" El groaned, but she was fighting a smile down when she turned back to Mike. "Have they been there the whole time?"

"Who knows." Mike rolled his eyes. El glanced at the time. It was getting close to dinner and Hopper was expecting her home soon.

"We should probably get going." El sighed, disappointed that their date was over so soon. They'd already been here for an hour and half. Mike stood too, quickly fumbling for his wallet at the same time El reached for her small stash of money in her bag. They paused and

looked at each other in surprise.

"I asked you out Mike, I'll get it." She assured him happily. He hesitated and looked like he wanted to argue, but when El pinned him with a hard 'Hopper-esque' stare he relented.

"Okay. But it's my treat next time." Mike agreed.

Next time? El's heart did backflips in her chest. Did that mean there would be another date? Mike didn't seem to notice how pink her cheeks had gone and he waited for her to place the money on the table before the two of them began to head towards the front door.

El paused and glanced towards the booth where their friends had nonchalantly slouched into their seats in an attempt to appear as inconspicuous as possible. She rolled her eyes.

"Bye Max. Bye Will. Bye Dustin. Bye Lucas." El called loudly, watching in satisfaction as each one of their friends flinched in their seats in response to their name. They lowered their newspapers one by one, looking properly caught out and sheepish.

Mike and El snorted and waved goodbye to their nosy friends, heading out into the cold air. It was almost too cold to bike at this point, but Mike seemed to enjoy it even in the cold weather and if El got to cozy up to him to keep warm, well, she wasn't complaining.

The ride home was cold and lovely. El huddled closer to Mike as they biked towards her home and they were both breathless by the time they reached the side of the highway by Hopper Cabin. He pulled the bike over and gently helped El off once again, their hands lingering together, both reluctant for their date to end.

El quivered from the cold and the excitement of their date while trying to fight off the disappointment that it had come to an end.

"I had a really good time Mike. Were you serious about a next time?" El asked hopefully, her breath lingering in the air.

"Yes!" He blurted, nodding vigorously. El laughed, feeling as though she could easily take flight right then and there, or just burst in happiness. They shared a goofy smile together.

“Do you want me to walk you in?” Mike offered hopefully, also wanting to prolong their date.

“You should probably stay here, it’s getting dark so I’d just have to walk you right out again.” The idea doesn’t sound so bad. Then she’d get to stay with Mike just a little longer. But El knew Hopper was waiting for her.

Her fingers were frozen solid and it was indeed getting dark, but El was loath to break their contact. She glanced back at the forest almost reproachfully, before Mike said: “El?”

She looked back at Mike and immediately her breath was stolen away. His eyes were dark and hopeful and flustered all at once.

“Can I kiss you?”

El’s eyes widened. It only took her a split second to decide.

“Yes.”

No sooner than the words are out, Mike gently moved forward to kiss her....

And promptly missed.

A nervous giggle bubbled out of her when Mike’s lips landed on the corner of her mouth instead, and he pulled back, blushing from his head to his toes.

“Oops.” He chuckled sheepishly.

The fluttering energy exploding in tingles all throughout her body returns full force when El decides to help him out a little. Cupping Mike’s cheek gently, his breath hitched as she guided his mouth to hers. Their noses knocked slightly together at first, but El quickly maneuvers around this obstacle.

Their kiss is clumsy but Mike’s lips are soft and warm and *oh*. El sighed contentedly into their kiss as his hands found their way into her curls and suddenly she’s floating, fireworks burst behind her eyelids and she’s completely lost in him. She drinks him in and tries

to burn the feeling into her memory as she struggles to process that she's *kissing Mike Wheeler*.

El is pretty sure she could die happily right this moment. Why weren't they always doing this? Could she kiss him from now on?

The kiss doesn't last more than ten seconds and as they pull back, Mike looks at her with such a breathtakingly heartfelt gaze that El almost tackled him into another kiss right then and there. But they both know they need to get moving and somehow El resisted the urge.

"You... you're amazing." Mike breathed, his face is glowing and El is certain her face is just as flushed. Their foreheads are pressed together and neither of them wants to move away.

"You too. I mean... *wow*." El giggled, she can't stop smiling. She's struggling to remember her name right now because Mike Wheeler just kissed her! How could she have any kind of coherent thought right now other than that?

They part ways in the best kind of daze. She bid him goodnight with a kiss to the cheek, because if she kissed his lips again El knew that she wouldn't be able to part. The walk home is like she's floating on white, fluffy clouds instead of the thin layer of snow in the forest.

She threw the cabin door open, the goofy grin on her face not going away anytime soon. Her face is bright pink but the rest of her body is freezing but holy shit she actually kissed Mike! She nearly swooned at the memory.

"You're in a good mood kid." Hopper called from the kitchen with a smirk.

"I am." El agreed sincerely, shrugging her coat off with a huge, goofy grin on her face.

Hopper leaned against the kitchen counter, his arms crossed over his chest, regarding his adoptive daughter in amusement. He snorted and watched as she waltzed into the house like nothing, but he let it slide because they needed to get cooking.

They fall into a comfortable routine soon after that. El prepared the vegetables and Hopper looked after the pasta, keeping a careful eye on the pot and his daughter at the same time.

When they are finally sitting down at the dinner table about to eat, Hopper strikes.

“You know, I had the strangest phone call from Benny...”

El only smiled harder.

...

*****OMAKE/ BONUS? *****

“Do you want my cherry? I don’t really like—“

“Mike I like you. A lot.” El stated at the same time.

Mike’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened. He was halfway between reaching for the stem of his cherry and froze at the unexpected statement.

“I think you’re really cool and you’ve got an ass that just won’t quit.” El rambled, deciding that if she was going to go for it, then she was *really* going to go for it. Because *damn*, that ass really just wouldn’t quit.

“And yes, I’ll take your cherry. Thank you.” El said with an outrageously flirtatious and overly suggestive wink.

Mike Wheeler fainted.

Notes for the Chapter:

I couldn't resist adding the little bonus scene at the end once I realized that part sounded a little strange... so why not embrace it ! :D

11. Just Another Day (Epilogue)

Several weeks passed by for the Party in a blur of fun, homework and anticipation for the holidays. In between wading through homework, El and Max finally tried their first game of Dungeons and Dragons.

El was immediately hooked, but Max was only sold once Mike relented and said: *“fine! You can make up a new class. Be a zoomer for all I care.”* After that, the game went smoothly and everyone had a blast.

Thanksgiving had come and gone. It had been a very happy and rambunctious affair because Mrs. Wheeler was ambitious. After Mike had brought El over several times to work on their class project for history, Karen had easily put two and two together when she'd caught them holding hands under the table as they worked.

The guest list quickly grew from the Wheeler family, to the Byers family, to encompass El and Hopper, and then from there it was—what the heck! Let's invite over everyone.

So, on Thanksgiving Day, the three Byers, two Hoppers, four Sinclairs plus one Mayfield and two Hendersons piled into the Wheeler household. It was loud and boisterous and just as wonderful as El ever imagined such a big family.

She finally got to meet Jonathan and Nancy, who she immediately adored. Mike's older sister was kind and beautiful and genuine. Even the strange, knowing glances Nancy exchanged with a rapidly reddening Mike hadn't bothered her in the slightest.

And Will proudly introduced her to Jonathan, the excitement had been so apparent El wondered if he'd take flight. Jonathan was soft spoken and kind, but much like Nancy he seemed like a very genuine person. He cared as much about Will as Will did of him and it was heartwarming to see the two brothers together.

Max had a great time at Thanksgiving too. The Sinclairs were a warm, welcoming family and had immediately taken to Max. And as El watched her best friend interact with the Sinclair family, it became

apparent that the Californian was just as taken with them.

Even Hopper had a good time. For a while he'd chatted with Ted about manly things and then for a good portion of the night had looked a little cozy with Joyce Byers. It was cute and endearing and El couldn't help but hope that something happened for Hopper and Joyce. Judging by the knowing looks Jonathan and Will exchanged with El, they didn't mind the thought either.

She couldn't remember ever being happier. Surrounded by her friends and their family, eating Mrs. Wheeler's amazing home cooked food and then just hanging out after... El couldn't help but hope that every holiday after this was similar.

...

In the week after thanksgiving, El immediately zeroed in on the flyers posted around Hawkins High. It was pretty hard not to, admittedly. The lockers were absolutely plastered with the bright blue posters, declaring that the 'Winter Formal' was just around the corner!

She studied the time and date on the poster, her eyes flickering over the *Dec 19th 8PM-11PM* and the *formal dress required*, her excitement building. She'd never been to a dance before, but wasn't that something you could go to with your friends? Or the person you were dating?

Mike and El weren't officially girlfriend and boyfriend yet, but she didn't mind. She was just enjoying the stolen kisses and holding hands and spending time with Mike. Did you need to be boyfriend and girlfriend to go to a dance together?

"Max!" El blurted as soon as the red head arrived for school. Luckily none of the boys were here yet, so El could talk to her best friend in relative privacy. Max took one look at the blue posters and her best friend and immediately clued in.

"Good morning to you too El." Max teased. "Why are you so excited about a dance?"

"I've never been to one before." El admitted sheepishly, not noticing

how Max's face instantly became softer at the admission. "And I was hoping everyone would want to go and uh... Mike would want to go with me."

Last year El and Max had been too new of friends for her to feel comfortable asking if she wanted to go to the dance. And judging by how last year Max had expressed disdain for the high school dance scene, El didn't bring it up for the other ones. But this time was different! Max and El were best friends now and El wanted to go to the dance.

"Well, then lets go." Max said simply, opening up her locker. El stared at her best friend in surprise, having expected her to dig her heels in a little more.

"How do you plan on asking Wheeler?" Max asked after a moment.

"I'm not too sure. I'll have to think on it." El barely had any time to consider this being that she'd only seen the posters a few minutes before Max.

Could she just walk up and ask him? Would he even want to go? But then again... an idea struck through her and suddenly El knew that was how she would ask him. Before she could tell Max her idea, the red head interrupted her.

"You'll have to tell me later. Here they come." She pointed over El's shoulder. Sure enough, Will and Lucas had just arrived, looking a little cold and pulling off their toques as they came around the corner. Lucas caught sight of the two girls first and he made a beeline for them.

"Hey guys!" Will greeted happily, and a round of pleasantries were exchanged. Quite suddenly Max got a determined look in her eyes just as Lucas and Will seemed to notice the posters plastered all around them on the lockers.

"Hey stalker." Max called, catching Lucas's attention.

"Yeah?" He looked to his girlfriend confusedly.

"You, me, dance?" Max asked, jerking her thumb towards the poster.

Lucas looked adorably flustered and it took him a moment to put two and two together.

"That sounds great." Lucas finally managed to say, the tips of his ears turning red at Max's forwardness. She certainly kept him on his toes, especially when she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him in for a quick kiss as though to seal the deal.

"So you want to go the dance?" Will asked curiously, eyeing the blue posters and smoothly stepping around the kissing couple.

El nodded enthusiastically. "I think it could be fun."

"So are you going to ask Mike?" Will asked with a grin.

"Yes. I have an idea, so I hope he doesn't ask me before I have the chance." El admitted with a pleased smile.

As if they'd summoned him by saying his name one too many times, El could see a familiar head of fluffy dark hair appear at the end of the hall. It was Mike and Dustin, who'd just arrived to school. They spotted everyone pretty quickly and El gave a friendly wave. The two boys immediately changed course and made their way to the group.

"Hey guys!" Dustin greeted. Mike also said hello, smoothly sliding to stand beside El. It appeared he hadn't noticed the posters just yet, for which El was glad.

"We're going to the Winter Formal." Max announced after they exchanged greetings.

"You and Lucas?" Mike asked curiously, wondering why they had to announce that.

"No Wheeler. All of us. We're all going to the dance." Max stated simply.

"Oh." Mike said dumbly, finally clueing in on the almost deranged amount of blue posters on the walls, lockers and doors of the hallway.

"I guess that could be fun." Dustin said, mulling it over, "I like the idea of going stag. That way I can dance with all the ladies." He then

proceeded to make a ridiculous purring noise, wagging his eyebrows.

El giggled and caught Mike's eye. He seemed to be looking back and forth between the posters and El, but it was at that moment the warning bell rang.

"Shit. We'd better go grab our stuff." Dustin sighed, "catch you later guys." Without another word Dustin dragged Mike away towards their lockers.

"See you later." Lucas and Will quickly departed as well, leaving Max and El to finish gathering their stuff.

"Thanks Max." El said happily. They made their way to their first period of the day.

"I'm going to be a little late for lunch. I'm going to ask Mike to the dance." El said as they entered the classroom.

Max gave her a broad grin and said: "go get him Tiger." Before they sat down and class began.

The distance runner tried and failed to pay attention, she was far too excited to properly focus. It was funny how anything Mike related made it hard to be a good student.

Lunch couldn't come soon enough.

...

El all but pounced on Mike as soon as the second period bell rang, signalling the beginning of lunch.

"Mike! Can we take a quick walk before we go to the club room?" She asked breathlessly. Mike looked up at her, rather startled and confused and a little impressed by how fast she'd made it from her seat to his in the ten seconds since the bell rang.

"Er... Sure El." He agreed hastily, getting over his surprise quickly.

He helped gather her school stuff and carried her bag for her as they headed out into the hallway. Truthfully, he'd been distracted that morning thinking about the impending dance. It seemed everyone was on board to go, and immediately his mind had turned to asking El. Mike had never been to a dance, so he wasn't sure he'd enjoy it, but seeing the excitement on El's face had left no question that he'd at least go and try it out!

"Should we grab our lunches?" Mike asked curiously, allowing El to lead him towards the front doors of the school.

"No, it's okay." She assured him, "it will only take a minute or two." They headed out into the cold November air sans jackets. Mike was wearing one of his knitted sweaters and El had on a Hawkins High zip up—but their sweaters did little to stave off the cold.

She led him around the corner of the school and Mike followed. He wasn't too sure why El wanted to lead him out here, but as they reached a portion of the school between two windows, out of the cold wind, she seemed to deem this an acceptable place to stop.

"Is everything okay?" Mike asked worriedly.

"Everything is great." El quickly assured him, she seemed nervous and excited all at once, which helped ease some of his concern. "I just wanted to give you this." She finally blurted, digging around in the pocket of her zip up and drawing out a very crumpled piece of paper.

"Oh, okay." Mike accepted the piece of paper bewilderedly, but began to smooth it open when he saw the expectant look on El's face. She motioned for him to read it. And suddenly he recognized the paper in his hands. Mike swallowed and glanced back down at the list, his eyes scanning over that fateful piece of paper that nearly tore their friendship apart.

Why is she showing me this? And suddenly Mike realized that there were no longer just three points. There were four.

His mouth went dry. There, scrawled in her neat handwriting below the previously last point was:

(4) Ask Mike Wheeler to be my date to the Winter Formal.

Mike's head whipped up so fast he made himself dizzy. El smiled at him sweetly before reaching for his hand, gently grasping it in her own.

"Michael Wheeler," El began in a very serious voice, "will you do me the greatest honour of attending the Winter Formal as my date?" Mike's head and heart felt as though they were about to explode in sheer disbelief. She waited patiently for him to process what just happened, her smile growing into her slightly crooked grin, a blush erupting across his cheeks.

"Yes I..." Mike stuttered, tripping over his own tongue. "Ireallywanttogowithyoupleaseandthankyou." His cheeks slowly turned a shade of pink that was so impressive El couldn't help but giggle.

Even though they'd been on a couple of dates at this point, he still can't believe that she would want to go to a dance with him. But it's getting easier to believe everyday. Everyday that El looks at him, her warm brown eyes alight with excitement, every time she took his hand, every moment that they would just spend together, talking or hanging out.

"I'm such a dweeb." Mike groaned, glad that the others weren't around to witness this.

"Maybe," El said gently, "but you're my dweeb." She planted a bold little kiss against Mike's knuckles that made both of their hearts to leap.

"And you're both my dweebs too." Called a poorly imitating, high-pitched voice.

El and Mike both nearly combusted in embarrassment right then and there. Dustin, Will, Lucas and Max revealed themselves, wearing matching, shit eating grins as they stared at El and Mike from the slightly ajar window. Apparently one of the two windows they'd stopped beside belonged to the AV Club room because of course it would.

Their private moment hadn't been nearly as private as the two of them had initially believed.

"You guys are dead." Mike finally managed to stammer, groaning and looking at El with a sheepish smile. He loved their friends, yes: but that wouldn't stop him from murdering them for this.

The four friends hurriedly closed the window, laughing obnoxiously.

"Well, I guess we should head in to have lunch." El said, rolling her eyes at their friends' antics.

"We should." Mike agreed, feeling a little emboldened by the fact that El Hopper had just asked him to be her date to the Winter Formal; he leaned over and gently placed a kiss on her lips. He sighed softly against her lips; the warm, electric feeling that zinged through his body was something that Mike hoped he'd never get used to. El looked momentarily starry eyed as he pulled back, but she grinned and caught him with another kiss happily.

They held hands on the way back into school, Mike ignored the whispers and the stares that followed them as he and El walked hand in hand. If she would never stop holding his hand Mike Wheeler would be a very happy guy.

...

December flew by.

Mike and El got a good grade for their joint presentation, which took a little longer than El would like to admit. Mostly because she'd get so distracted by Mike, their study sessions often turned into something a little cuddlier than just working on homework. It was hard to hold hands and work on your project when one of your arms was out of commission; this was something El had come to learn in the weeks of her recovery.

Unfortunately the cast wouldn't be coming off until just before the New Year, when Doctor Owens gave her the okay. That could be six weeks or longer, but with just over four weeks under her belt; El couldn't wait until the day her cast came off.

Soon, the night of the Winter Formal was upon them.

The excitement of the school was palpable; the only topic of interest right now seemed to be the Winter Formal, or more specifically, who everyone was going to the Winter Formal with.

Dustin and Will seemed happy to be going stag. The four boys made plans to meet up and head to the dance together, while Hopper was in charge of ferrying the two girls.

"I'll be here to pick you up at eleven fifteen sharp." Hopper eyed the two excited girls sternly from the driver's seat of the truck. It was just after 8:30PM and they were parked in front of the Hawkins High Gymnasium.

"Thanks Chief!" Max said happily, sliding out of the truck first with an over exaggerated nod.

"We'll be waiting Hop." El agreed as she too slid out, "have fun on your date with Joyce! Love you!" She added cheerfully before she shut the door.

Hopper looked astonished and embarrassed all at once. Clearly he hadn't realized that El knew about his 'date' tonight with Joyce. Silly adults. They thought they were being so sneaky, but between El and Will, they'd put two and two together and realized their individual parents had been sneaking around like a couple of ... well, teenagers really.

The two girls waved goodbye to a flustered Hopper before he peeled out of the parking lot.

There were already plenty of teenagers here for the dance; the parking lot was full of vehicles.

El and Max headed towards the entrance to the high school gymnasium, where they could hear the loud music spilling from the windows and doors of the gym. They were a couple minutes early, so it was unlikely the boys were here just yet.

Max led El into the gym, barely pausing to fork over their tickets to the Winter Formal committee (because they were in high school and

they refused to call it a Snowball because it had to sound fancier than that).

They paused for a moment at the entrance to the gym, taking in the decorations. The decorating committee had done a beautiful job. The Snowball and the Winter Formal must have shared decorations because the tinsel curtains were still the same silver, but it framed the gym beautifully. In the middle of the floor a huge, glittering disco ball hung, spinning lazily. Shimmering light strands and streamers were gathered towards the centre, making the lights look like floating fairies. Blue and silver balloons littered the dance floor, kicking up at the feet of their dancing classmates as they moved.

“Want to find a place to sit?” Max jerked her thumb to the right, towards the bleachers behind the tinsel wall. El nodded, swaying a little to the music as she followed her best friend.

They settled down on the bleachers, keeping their eyes trained on the doorway so they could watch for their friends. They had a perfect view of the door, and El tried not to focus too much on the fluttering sensations in her stomach. She was really curious to see what Mike would be wearing.

“Don’t worry El, he’ll be here.” Max’s lip curled into a very Cheshire cat grin. El didn’t even try to hide that she was busy watching the doorway, but she did give her friend an appreciative once over.

“You’re going to knock Lucas’s socks off Max.” She said sincerely.

“Thanks El.” Max’s cheeks grew a little pink as she too snuck a glance at the doorway.

And it was true. Max wore a simple, strapless satin green A-line dress with no embellishments (Max told El if any dress had a bow on it she would personally rip it to shreds). She’d left her long, beautiful red hair loose, only the front parts of her hair pinned so her hair wouldn’t be in her face while she danced. She was stunning.

“I think you’ll give Wheeler a heart attack.” Max shot back teasingly. El blushed and fiddled with the skirt of her dress.

"I'm hoping for a little speechlessness at least." She giggled nervously.

It was dumb. El knew it was just going to be regular old Mike and she was just her usual El self, but somehow wearing a dress and doing her makeup a little (with Max's help) made the butterflies in her stomach multiple ten fold. She wanted to see how Mike looked as much as she wanted to see his reaction to how she looked.

"El." Max stirred her friend out of her nervous musings gently. When the distance runner looked over to Max quizzically, she smirked and pointed lazily towards the door. El turned and immediately her mouth went dry and her heart back flipped right of her chest.

Mike was here and he looked amazing.

He and the other boys hadn't noticed them at first, but she'd recognize those dark, fluffy curls anywhere. He wore a dark blue suit with a white collared shirt beneath and a black bow tie. El couldn't help but run her eyes appreciatively over his form, her cheeks turning pink as she did so. Aliens could have arrived and abducted everyone at the dance and she probably wouldn't have even noticed. It was Max who once again pulled her out of her thoughts.

"Come on, let's go knock em' dead." The Californian smirked at El, but thankfully didn't tease her anymore. El nodded, swallowing heavily before following her best friend towards the rest of the Party.

Lucas and Dustin lingered back at the entryway table, handing over the tickets to the waiting committee members. Mike and Will were craning their necks to search for the two girls in the increasingly crowded and loud gymnasium.

Nervous tingles shifted under El's skin, making her feel warm and fluttery the closer they got to the boys.

It was Will who spotted the girls first, with a sly smile he tapped Mike on the shoulder. He turned around and an arrow zinged right through El's heart.

If she thought he looked good from afar, she certainly wasn't

prepared for how good he looked up close. Luckily Max gave El a little shove towards him; otherwise she would have stopped walking. Eyes wide, she drank in the sight of Mike in formal wear. The suit brought out the darkness of his eyes. Somehow in the glow of the romantic lighting, his freckles stood out even more and she could feel herself swoon. All at once El felt as though she would explode into tiny, happy, love-struck stars.

El was so smitten that she doesn't even notice a similar reaction in Mike as he saw her for the first time.

His eyes widened and his breath caught in his throat and it's as though he's temporarily frozen before he manages to blurt: "You're beautiful." And she was. El wore a dark blue, three-quarter length sleeve dress with a small belt around her waist. Her curls were loose, with only her bangs pinned back.

"Thank you." El flushed happily, "you look so handsome." She added sincerely and it was Mike's turn to flush brilliantly.

"Ahem." Dustin cleared his throat and El realized that they had an audience.

"You look handsome too Dustin." El assured him with a laugh when she realized that Dustin was also waiting to be complimented.

"About time you noticed." He nodded happily. Max and Lucas are stuck in a similarly frozen pose as they saw each other for the first time. Max's eyes trailed over Lucas appreciatively and El nearly melted when Lucas flushed. It was adorable.

"Would you like to go get some drinks?" Will asked politely.

Surprisingly neither Dustin or Will teased the two couples, letting them have their moment. At that, the group headed towards the refreshment table. El trailed beside Mike, exchanging shy glances as they each drank each other in a little more, their hands brushing gently as they walked.

"So admit it Max, you were checking us out, weren't you?" Dustin teased after they'd gotten their drinks and found a patch of

gymnasium to loiter by near the dance floor. Max rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Please. I don’t check anyone out.” She glanced at Lucas automatically from the corner of her eyes and blushed a little. Okay. So maybe Max checked *one* person out.

“Max,” El scolded teasingly, “friends don’t lie.”

The distance runner was taken aback when simultaneously Dustin, Will, Lucas and Mike turned to look at her strangely.

“What?” She asked confusedly, returning their strange stares with a befuddled look.

“Friends don’t lie?” Lucas repeated, “where did you hear that? I don’t think we’ve ever used that in front of you.”

El was extremely confused, why were they all still looking at her funny?

“Er... no, you didn’t. Max always said it during our freshman year and then I just picked it up from her... Max?”

It was Max’s turn to be under the scrutinizing stares of all their friends. Unbeknownst to El, Max had turned an increasingly bright pink colour and as they all turned to the Californian, there was almost steam coming out of her ears in embarrassment.

“That’s what we always say! Where did you hear that Max?” Will asked curiously. She mumbled something and looked away, growing increasingly flustered.

“Max.” Lucas pouted, trying to get his girlfriend to look at him.

“I overheard you dweebs say it once in the arcade one time okay? I liked it and so I started to say it too.” Max finally blurted out.

“Wait what?”

“When was that?”

“You stole our phrase!”

Lucas held up a hand to demand silence at the outbursts of Dustin, Will and Mike. They granted it to him, but their grins didn't fade.

“So Mad Max... what you're saying is you used to eavesdrop on us at the arcade before we were friends? Does that make you a stalker too?” Lucas laughed and dodged a punch in the shoulder from his girlfriend, who was bright red from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

Max groaned as Lucas gathered her in his arms before she could run away.

“You guys are jerks.” She moaned into Lucas's shoulder, her voice muffled.

They laughed and silently all four boys mentally promised to never let the Californian live this down. But for now... There was a dance going on.

A slow song came on and the lights dimmed a little, El found herself admiring the way the decorations cast a romantic glow across the dance floor.

“Would you like to dance?” Mike asked.

She looked to him in surprise and he smiled, holding out his hand for her to take. She accepted, relishing the delicious simmer of nerves in her stomach at the contact. They found a place to set their drinks down and then they were on the dance floor.

It was then that El realized she'd never danced before. Not like this. This wasn't a silly dance you did in your bedroom with your best friend on a sleepover.

“I don't know how to dance.” El admitted worriedly, her eyes cast downwards.

“I don't know how either.” Mike said truthfully, “but it might be fun to learn together?” At his shy, sincere offer, she glanced up to him. He looked flustered and as though he felt a little out of place to be on the dance floor, but clearly he wanted to be here with her and it

made her whole body feel light.

“Okay.” She agreed with a smile.

“I think your hands go on my shoulders,” Mike gently guided her one good arm upwards and El gently grasped his shoulder. “And my hands go er... here.” He slowly and very carefully placed his hands around El’s waist and she nearly sighed.

“Is this okay?” He asked.

“Perfect.” El nodded, not noticing the blush erupt across his cheeks.

They began to sway on their feet and move slowly, mirroring the other people on the dance floor as the song played. It was beautiful and wonderful and anything she could have wanted. She relished the feeling of Mike’s hands around her waist and the way his cheeks seemed to stay in a permanent blush. Mostly, she loved the way his eyes kept drifting to her own and she found herself lost in them.

Surely he could feel how hard her heart was beating? Was this a normal feeling? They weren’t even technically boyfriend or girlfriend yet, but El already knew the whispers in her heart belonged to much deeper feelings. But if this wasn’t normal, El didn’t care because judging by the depth of emotion reflected in Mike’s eyes he felt it too.

“You’re pretty.” El sighed, boldly kissing the tip of Mike’s nose much to his surprise. She didn’t know it was possible for him to turn pinker, but Mike did. They swayed back and forth to the music as Mike struggled not to recover from her surprise statement.

“You’re pretty too.” Mike finally recovered, “really pretty.”

El could happily stay in Mike’s arms forever in that moment.

...

It’s December 24th and Mike Wheeler is in a Code Red state of nervousness and panic for one reason only: today is the day he is going to ask El Hopper to be his girlfriend.

Hopper was putting in an appearance at the station Christmas party

tonight, so El was free to come over to the Wheeler household for a few hours. It would be just the two of them and Mike had been rotating between excitement, nervousness and dread all day. But he was determined! So far El had been the one to ask him on a first date. And ask him to the Winter Formal. So Mike wanted to be the one to ask El to go steady.

As seven o' clock neared, Mike double-checked that everything in the basement was ready.

At exactly 7:00PM the doorbell rang, catching Mike off guard in the basement. He quickly flicked off the lights and ran up the stairs, knowing it was going to be a race to beat a certain competition to the door. By the time he got upstairs, Mike knew he'd already lost.

"Hi El!" Holly chirped happily, opening the door for Mike's hopefully soon-to-be girlfriend. Mike was always momentarily shocked by how pretty El was. She walked into the door and hadn't spotted him yet, consumed by the little six-year-old Wheeler in front of her. Her soft brown curls were getting slightly longer and yet no less wild. Snow clung to her hair and to her coat, giving her a dreamy, snow kissed look.

"Hi Holly!" El greeted warmly, "how did your first gymnastics practice go the other day?"

It turned out that Holly was a huge fan of El. Perhaps for someone who had never had any younger or older siblings it could have been awkward being around a young child with no prior experience, but both girls had taken to each other like a duck in the water.

Holly quickly began to fill El in on all the details of her first gymnastics practice; Mike shook himself out of his dazed stupor and stepped forward. El offered him a warm smile that made his heart flip as Holly finished her story.

"That sounds like it was really fun. Do you think you'll go back again?" El asked, touching Mike's hand briefly as he helped her shrug off her coat. Her cast would be coming off just before the New Year and El had been really excited to wear her coat normally again.

“Yeah, I liked it. And Erica is there too so that made it a lot more fun.” Holly thought deeply for a moment. “It’s too bad you can’t come.”

“I could always come watch.” El offered, “I don’t think they’d let me participate though.”

“Okay! I’d like that.” Holly agreed happily.

“Me too.” El exchanged a smile with the youngest Wheeler.

“Holly, it’s bath time!” Mrs. Wheeler called from somewhere upstairs, prompting Holly to groan. She bid El a quick goodnight before disappearing up the stairs, leaving the two teenagers alone in the entryway of the Wheeler household.

“Hi Mike.” El said properly, turning to him and pressing a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“Hi El.” He managed to say shyly, trying to hold it together because something as simple as a kiss from El made his legs turn to jelly.

“Let’s head downstairs. I’ve got a little surprise.” The nerves were back full force now with no Holly to buffer the conversation. Mike gently took her hand and led her towards the basement door.

“A surprise?” El parroted curiously.

“You’ll see.” Mike smiled, not wanting to give anything away. He opened the basement door and the two of them stared down into the darkness.

“Watch your step.” Mike instructed as they made their way down carefully down the stairs. Once El was on the last step, he released her hand.

“Just wait here a second.” He said before quickly scurrying over to the corner of the room. Mike took a deep breath and then flicked on the switch.

He could hear El’s breath hitch in her throat as the entire basement living area lit up with the soft glow of Christmas lights. Instead of the

table where they normally set up their Dungeons and Dragons campaigns, Mike had built a blanket fort using that same table and stuffed every available spare pillow and blanket inside. He'd strung Christmas lights all throughout the ceiling of the room, as well as in and around the blanket fort itself. The coloured lights cast an ethereal glow over the room. He'd also brought the small TV down and placed it in front with plenty of movie choices.

Mike turned nervously to El to see her reaction, but she was still staring around in wonder at the set up.

"I thought we could watch a movie and hang out in the fort." Mike offered tentatively.

"It's so pretty Mike. I love it." El breathed finally, her eyes flitting finally from all the Christmas lights and the blanket fort to him. He let out a sigh of relief and then watched in astonishment as El all but raced into the fort and catapulted herself awkwardly inside.

"I call this pillow!" She called teasingly.

"No fair." Mike grinned, quickly following her into the blanket fort. It was a little squishier with the two of them inside, but neither teenager minded. El stared up at the ceiling of the blanket fort, before turning onto her good arm and leaning her head on her hand so she could sit up slightly and look at him.

"Your fort building skills are pretty great." El complimented and Mike flushed, her eyes dropping to his lips before meeting his gaze again. She didn't seem the least bit ashamed to have been caught eyeing his lips and Mike found himself trying to calm his erratic heartbeat.

"T-thanks." He stammered like a total dweeb.

Did El know what she did to him?

Judging by the tiny smirk on her lips as she watched him color, he thought she must have got some pleasure out of watching him blush. He thought it might be time to turn the tables on her a little.

"El." Mike said in a low soft, voice. El's eyes met his curiously.

“Yes?” *Dammit*. Now he couldn't help but focus on her soft, pink lips.

Get it together, Mike scolded himself. He had a mission after all! He had to do this before he lost his nerve.

“I really like you,” He blurted out, “I think you're the coolest person ever and you're amazing and I'm so glad I almost ran you over with my bike.” El's features softened, her brown eyes swam with an emotion that made his heart ache and do backflips in his chest all at once.

“I really, really like you. And I was hoping that maybe... maybe you'd want to be my girlfriend?” Mike managed to get out the question, though apparently fusing words together in his haste to talk to El was going to become a thing.

He was pretty sure his whole face was stained bright pink forever, especially when El leaned forwards gently and pressed her lips to his. It was soft and warm and yet all at once Mike felt as though the nerves running through him would fizzle out into firecrackers.

“I'd love to be your girlfriend Mike. If you'll be my boyfriend?” El's cheeks were pink too and she beamed when he nodded dazedly.

They hugged after the confirmation, Mike drawing El in carefully and holding her close as he tried to regain control of his stampeding heart.

“I would have been fine with *hey baby, wanna go steady?*” El said slyly into his shoulder. Mike's cheeks burned and he squeezed El a little harder against him, not wanting her to see how red he was.

“How did you—you?” He squeaked. How had she found out about that possible option?

“Holly told me. She saw you practicing in the mirror.” El tried to stifle the giggles that were spilling past her lips but to no avail.

“I should have known.” Mike sighed, but he couldn't keep the grin off of his face. It was hard to be mad at Holly because he was far too happy.

El said yes! El Hopper is my girlfriend! He was tempted to pinch himself because it was so amazingly unbelievable that she would agree. And yet, here they were. Officially boyfriend and girlfriend.

“Now, what movie do you want to watch?” El asked excitedly.

They put on a cheesy Christmas movie and cuddled under the blanket fort for the rest of the evening.

When it was nearly time to go and Mike was about to see his girlfriend to the front door, she surprised him.

“Mike.” El pulled him by the arm gently towards the doorway much to his confusion. She pointed upwards with a wry smile at the small bundle of mistletoe that was sneakily hung in the kitchen doorway. That mistletoe definitely wasn’t there before, making Mike suspicious about his *other* sister who was home visiting right now and how sneaky she could be.

“Merry Christmas.” El murmured before standing up on her toes a little and pressing her lips softly against his. It didn’t take long for Mike’s brain to reboot (as it seemed to have to do every time she kissed him) and he returned her kiss eagerly.

“Merry Christmas El.” Mike murmured against her lips.

...

It was a beautiful late spring afternoon.

The trees were a lovely, deep green against the blue, blue sky and the shifting winds indicated that summer couldn’t be too far off.

“How are you holding up?” El called, looking to her left to see how her boyfriend was doing. That was a sight she would never tire of—Mike Wheeler running beside her, cheeks flushed from exertion, curls extra fluffy.

“Can we walk for a minute?” Mike’s responded breathlessly. El immediately complied, slowly to a walk as the sound of their feet hitting the pavement gradually slowed to a comfortable strolling pace.

Mike began to join her on her runs as soon as it was warm enough to resume running outside. His progress had been slow but steady, but the distance he was able to run steadily increased.

Initially he'd wanted it to be a surprise, but his running form needed improvement and who better than to ask but his girlfriend who was the star distance runner of Hawkins High? He joined her two to three times a week, and because of this her routes had widened considerably—Hopper was much happier that she had a running partner even if it was “that kid Wheeler” as he so aptly put it.

“Thanks.” Mike gasped, walking and trying to breathe deeply at the same time.

“It’s only another two kilometers from here.” El patted her boyfriend on the shoulder with a grin.

“Only?” He groaned, but there was a teasing smile on his lips.

“Only.” El agreed with a wry smile, “and if we don’t hurry up, my debate partners will be left unaided.” Mike rolled his eyes.

Hopper was at work today and then had a date with Joyce tonight, so El likely wouldn’t be seeing him until later in the evening.

The official debate of the muffin versus cupcake debacle that had quite frankly been going on for a ridiculous amount of time at this point was today. Somehow Mike knew that Dustin and El liked to push everyone’s buttons by sticking with their side of the argument—but more surprising was that Will had defected! Leaving it an equally pitched debate of three versus three.

They were supposed to finish their run before Mike’s friends came over to his house for the debate, followed by a planning session for Dungeons and Dragons.

Max meanwhile was finally teaching Lucas, Will and Dustin how to skateboard as a form of payback for the stunt they had pulled not two weeks before.

The three boys had been true to their word and made another banner, this time for Max. At the first opening track meet of the

season, they'd revealed a huge, bright, sparkling pink banner that read: "*Zoom Away Mad Max!*" and a second message of "*We believe in our Zoomer*".

Spectators swore a record must have been broken that day for the state of Indiana. Never had they seen anyone run the two hundred meter so fast... or keep running for that matter once they'd passed the finish line. Max made a beeline straight for the boys, her face beet red as she called out threats and a rather impressive variety of profanity.

Dustin, Will and Lucas had run so fast to get away from Max that Coach Jenkins, the track and field coach at Hawkins High had promptly offered them a spot on the team (which they graciously turned down).

Max, while highly embarrassed, was also very pleased with her own personal banner and had actually kept it, her face warm from happiness and mortification all in one. The skateboard lessons were a punishment for the other boys.

"I can't believe we're finally doing this debate." Mike sighed a long-suffering sigh.

"You're just worried because you're about to have your butt handed to you." El quipped in a superior tone, glancing slyly at Mike, who rolled his eyes and huffed.

"Okay El, we'll see who's laughing at the end of this debate." He warned with an equally superior tone, a smirk stretching across his lips. Lips that she'd spent more time than she'd like to admit staring at.

El couldn't resist, she stopped abruptly and stole a swift kiss. She swallowed the gasp that escaped Mike, greedily kissing the corners of his mouth before kissing him fully again. It's a reaction she will never tire of.

She pulled away and resumed walking as though nothing had happened, leaving her boyfriend spluttering incoherently.

“H-hey!” He finally stammered, face completely red. “That wasn’t fair.” Mike whined and El laughed, dancing out of his reach as he gave chase. They began running again, El would let him get close and then she’d pull ahead just as he made a grab for her. Finally Mike clued in to what she was doing and surprised her by lunging forward unexpectedly as she was about to pull away.

El squawked and they both tumbled sideways, towards the ditch. Mike held onto her tightly and they eventually came to a rolling stop, mussed and dirtied, but otherwise okay.

“That wasn’t fair.” El mumbled, trying not to smile at how messy Mike’s hair looked now. Sticks and grass stuck out of the fluffy curls she loved, a streak of dirt on his nose. She knew she couldn’t look much better.

“Neither is this.” Mike teased before kissing her. Fireworks exploded behind El’s eyelids and she leaned into him fully. Warmth tingled at her fingertips as she wove them into his hair and held him tight.

When they broke from their kiss they were breathless and starry eyed, leaning their foreheads against one another as they caught their breath.

“I love you.” Mike sighed happily. It wasn’t the first time he had said it and it certainly would not be the last.

“I love you too.” El smiled, pecking a small kiss to the tip of his nose before untangling herself from him and standing up.

“Now come on, we’ve got a debate to get to.” She grinned and offered her hand, which Mike took and she hauled him up.

They resumed running towards the Byers’ house, where their friends were waiting: together and happy.

At least until Dustin, El and Will won the debate.

...

The next time that fateful list resurfaces is years later.

El, bright eyed and bushy tailed, woke up to see an oddly familiar piece of paper on her pillow. They'd just gotten back from California, where they'd celebrated the newly minted Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair. It was a beautiful and happy affair. El had of course, given her best friend the gift befitting of Maxine Sinclair: a set of doilies and teacups. Max had laughed so hard she nearly fell over.

They'd arrived home late last night and had practically fallen into bed.

Barely blinking the sleep from her eyes, El unfolded the piece of paper and traced her fingertips down the list to her last point: (4) *Ask Mike Wheeler to be my date to the Winter Formal.*

As her fingertips traced down to something unexpected—a new point—her whole body tingled and her heart nearly exploded in her chest: (5) *Ask El Hopper to marry me.*

Her breath hitched and El's gaze shot up, her beautiful brown eyes wide. Mike, who'd just reentered the bedroom from their bathroom, stood sheepishly in the doorway.

"Eleanor Hopper," he began, coming to sit on her side of their bed and taking her hand gently in his own, "will you do me the greatest honour of becoming my wife?" Mike barely finished asking the question before El tackled him. She pressed kiss after kiss to his lips, barely remembering to say "yes" as she did so.

They'll pass the list back and forth over the years. They forged something that had nearly broken their friendship into something even stronger and even deeper—became something that invoked happiness and love. Eventually it even began to make it into the hands of their friends, and even Joyce and Hopper at one point.

Sometimes the points are heartfelt and sincere. Sometimes they are silly and unexpected. Either way, the friendships that they made starting with Mike and Dustin nearly running over an injured El Hopper, is a friendship that lasts a lifetime.

Notes for the Chapter:

And so ends "Fluffmaggedon Part 2"

Thank you so much for reading. I am so happy to have shared my story with you.

It is always so bittersweet to finish a story, whether you're reading or writing it. My goal for Just Another Day was to be consistent in updates and I am glad to have accomplished that!

Thank you again for taking the time to read. Have a lovely day!